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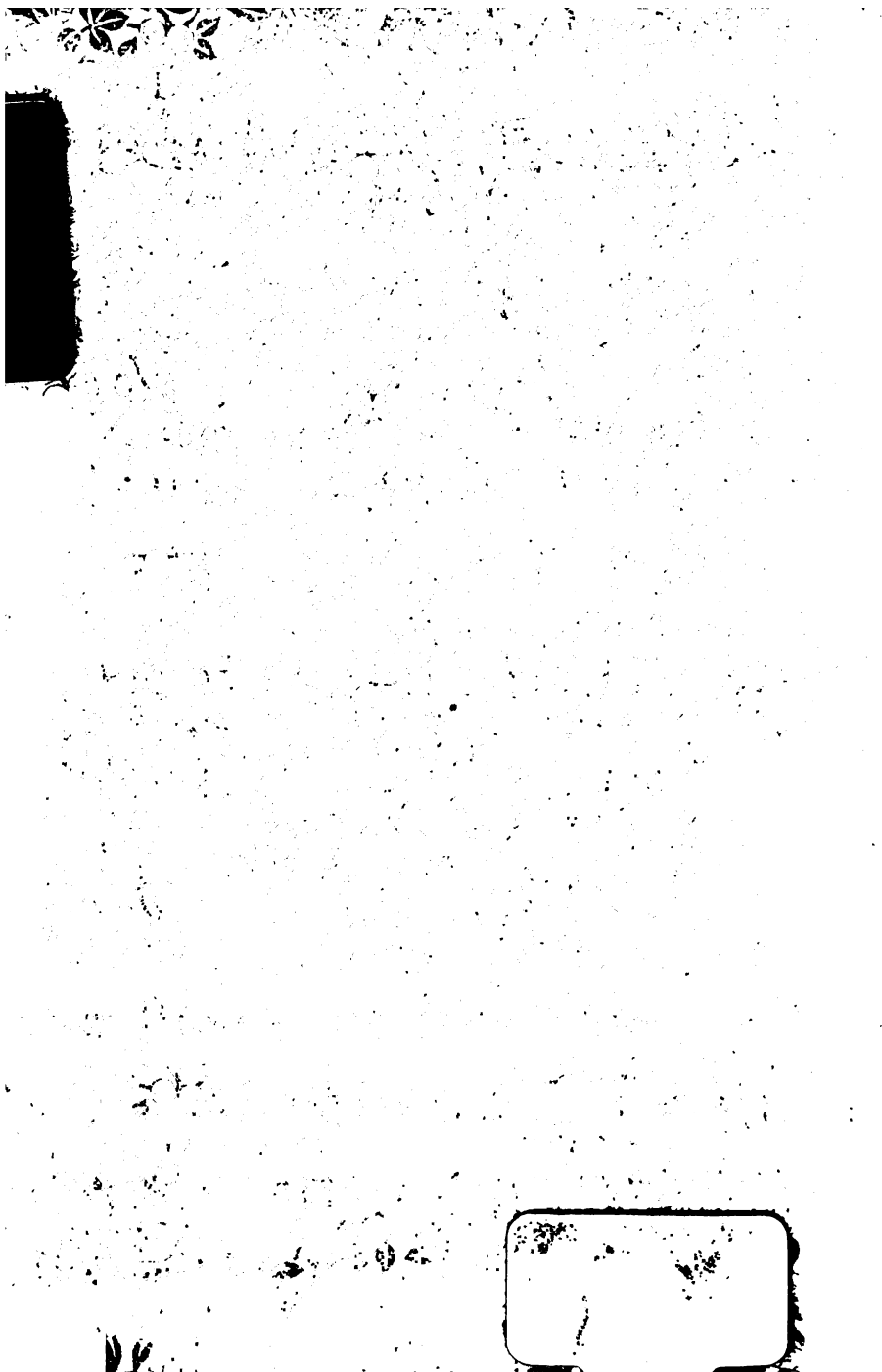
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VAL STRANGE







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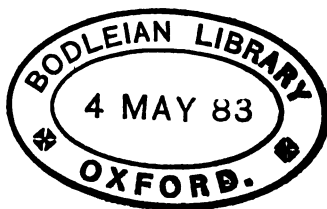
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VAL STRANGE.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ancient Johnson, servitor of the great house for half a century, presented himself in due time at the old-fashioned city hostel and asked for Mr. Lumby. Mr. Lumby had not yet arrived, and the old clerk sat down in his private room to wait. There was a mingling of early twilight with gaslight in the streets, and the room itself was sombre with much old mahogany. As he waited, the gaslights in the street grew brighter, and the shadows in the room grew deeper. The silence and the shadows and the waiting became in course of time quite unendurable, and the clerk rang for lights.

“Did Mr. Lumby name any time for returning?” he asked.

"No, sir ; not particular," said the waiter. "Leastways, I think not. I'll inquire." The waiter drew the blinds, stirred the fire, and having lingered a little, left the room with that air of foiled expectation peculiar to his tribe. Coming again in the course of a few minutes, he said that Mr. Lumby had left no word behind him as to the hour at which he would return.

"That is curious," said the old clerk, with a sort of tremulous disappointed dignity. "He asked me to dine with him at six o'clock this evening."

"Sing'lar," said the waiter, with raised eyebrows—"very sing'lar.—Shall I bring you anythin' while you wait, sir? A glass of sherry and a biscuit, now?" suggested the waiter, with an almost filial interest.

"Yes," said Johnson ; and sat there for another hour, crumbling his biscuit, and sipping slowly at his sherry. Steps came and went upon the stair, bells rang, voices ordered and voices answered, while Johnson sat wondering and waiting. At last a step came up the stair, and the clerk, with a

sort of weary anger, inwardly declared that he knew it would go by; but this time it came straight to the room, and Mr. Lumby entered. The old clerk rose to greet him; but the head of the great house, who was a much bigger man than ancient Johnson, laid both hands upon his shoulders and half forced him into his seat again.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Johnson," he said. "I am afraid I have spoiled your dinner. But no man is altogether master of his time, and I have been detained.—Let us see what they can do for us. Better late than never—eh, Johnson?"

"Better late than never, sir," returned the old clerk. "Better very late indeed, sir, than not at all."

"Ay," said the head of the firm; "better very late indeed, than not at all." There was something in his tone which seemed to give the remark a greater significance than the occasion called for; and when the old clerk looked at his employer, he saw a shadow resting on his face, which he had never seen before. "Better very late indeed, than not at

all." Lumby's voice trailed off, and the shadow deepened on his face. For a minute he stood absorbed in his own thoughts; and then, with a little shaking of the head, he roused himself, rang the bell, and entered into consultation with the waiter and the guest. Soup, fish, a bird, a cutlet, champagne, port.—"Yessir," "yessir," as the items were told off; and the waiter was gone to put the orders into execution. Lean Johnson, ancient servitor, so felt his visage glow with satisfaction at these arrangements, that he blew his nose in a very big bandana to hide himself, and emerging from his silken refuge, betrayed no more than a twinkling eye might tell.

"And Mr. Gerard is coming into the house, sir?" said the clerk.

His employer's eyes were fixed upon the fire with a far-away look.

"Yes," he said, recalling himself, and shifting in his chair, like one who shakes off an invisible burden; "Mr. Gerard is coming into the house. He is going to be married, Johnson. I suppose that you are a grandfather, long ago?"

"No, sir," said the ancient servitor gravely; "I am a single man."

"And quite an irreclaimable bachelor by now?" said Lumby, with a laugh. "Eh, Johnson. Quite a bachelor!"

"Why, yes, sir," returned Johnson. "There are two or three of us, sir, in the house. Neale is almost on the shelf by now."

"Ah," said Lumby gaily, "Neale is sixty, I should say."

"Fifty-eight, sir," answered the old clerk. —"Then there's Barnes. Barnes is over fifty, young as he looks. And Mr. Garling, he's another of the hopeless cases, eh, sir?"

There was a change in the countenance of the great man, and the shadow the clerk had noted there came back again. "You would scarcely fancy Garling a marrying man," he answered.

"Why, no, sir," said Johnson. "Scarcely. Mr. Garling is all for business. A long head, sir. I hope you'll forgive the liberty I take, but I've always thought the house was fortunate in Mr. Garling, sir."

"Ye-es," said the head of the firm, lingering on the word, not doubtfully, but as if his thoughts dwelt on something else.—"Is Garling popular?" he asked suddenly.

"Well, in a way, sir," said the old clerk. "He is looked up to, sir. I should say he is as much looked up to as the bank. People identify him with the house, sir. In another sense, we should hardly call him popular perhaps. A very reserved man, sir, is Mr. Garling; not exactly haughty, but reserved."

"And quite a bachelor, eh, Johnson?"

"Oh yes, sir, quite a bachelor," answered Johnson. "Almost as inveterate a bachelor as I am. He and Neale and Barnes and I are all in the same bag, I fancy, sir. We might make up a quartette party to sing, 'To keep single, I contrive'—we four, sir." The old clerk laughed and rubbed his hands, half at his jest and half at the appearance of the waiter, who came in to lay the cloth; which being done, another waiter came in with a tureen, and another with a decanter of sherry, and a fourth with nothing but a napkin and an air of authoritative supervision.

"You need not wait," said Mr. Lumby ; and the quartette withdrew itself, with lingering touches of decanter and table-cloth and salt-spoons, as though only half resigned to leave a picture unfinished.—"There are not many business men like Garling, eh, Johnson?"

"Well, sir," said Johnson, as if he tasted Garling with his soup, and after critical observation approved of him, "we think him quite unequalled. Business seems to be his very life, sir. Mr. Garling is not a man of whom I should be inclined to speak as a reveller, in any direction, but that's the only word that I can find. He seems to revel in business." It was evident that Johnson regarded the cashier with an unstinted veneration. With the first glass of champagne, the old clerk drank long life and happiness to Mr. Gerard ; but he went back to Garling, and as the good viands and the cheerful wine warmed his elderly heart, he chanted his praises higher. "He doesn't work like a servant, sir, but like a master. You might think, to see how he works, that every business combination was

intended to swell his own account at the bank. But then, it's a delight to him, and that's one proof of his financial genius."

If the ancient clerk had looked at his employer then, he might have seen the shadow deepen on his face; deepen, deepen, a shadow of mistrust and fear. The shadow of the cashier's ugly secret was on his heart, and fell outwards on his face. Garling under an alias? Garling married? Garling starving his wife? Incredible. And true.

"Yes," he made answer after a while, "he has always seemed absorbed in business—too much absorbed, perhaps, to be quite wholesome."

"Not a holiday for nine years, sir," said the old clerk. "It's wonderful, wonderful."—The head of the firm sat silent, sipping at his wine.—"And the business seems to absorb him altogether. Quite a lonely man."

Lumby stirred at that. "No friends?"

"Since young Martial died, more than twenty years ago, not one intimate friend, I believe, sir. Martial was managing clerk to Messrs. Begg, Batter, and Bagg, in Chancery

Lane, sir, the eminent legal firm. A most able and promising young man. His death was a great blow to Mr. Garling, and I believe he has never formed a friendship since."

"Perhaps that speaks well for him, Johnson?" said Mr. Lumby, in a questioning voice.

"I should say so, sir," the clerk responded—"decidedly, I should say so. Those stern and silent natures, sir, feel deeply." Elderly Johnson, with his own ancient heart softened and warmed within him, was prepared to take almost a sentimental view of Garling's loneliness. The port was old, like Johnson's self, and all the mellow shine of the suns that glowed upon its parent grape lay snugly beaming in his bosom. Kindly Johnson, thus happy and thus honoured, in private talk with the head of the great house, and sitting with his venerable legs beneath the same mahogany with him,—why, at such an hour should he not think well of all men, and best of all of the captain of his troop—the troop he had served in now for half a century?

The cloud of distrust lifted and lightened ever so little in Lumby's mind—and fell again. The wife might have brought desertion on herself, might have deserved it all, and more. But then—the alias, the alias! The cloud thickened and fell lower yet. The talk strayed to other themes, and Lumby strove to take his part in it, and bore himself well enough to make Johnson believe him the most affable of men. And when at last the elderly clerk had gone with an envelope in his breast-pocket, sealed as yet and of unknown contents, the head of the house walked the apartment with troubled steps and bent head. The dialogue he had overheard between Garling and his unknown visitor troubled him terribly. He had trusted Garling so completely, that no doubt of his probity had ever lifted its head. He had respected him so profoundly, that the revelation of that afternoon had come upon him as a thing unbelievable. And being once shaken in his belief in the man, the business idol he had set up all these years in his own mind began to totter. Garling might still

be honest in money matters, but there was more than room for doubt. Perhaps—so Mr. Lumby thought—his own laxness might have tempted the man, and being such a man as he now knew him to be, the chances of his fall from honesty seemed great. It still lacked an hour of midnight when Mr. Lumby rang the bell.

“I shall be out late,” he said to the waiter. “Let a fire be laid in my bedroom, so that I can light it on my return, and leave a small decanter of brandy there for me.”

The waiter bowed; and Mr. Lumby, assuming his hat and greatcoat, left the hotel, and walked resolutely towards his offices. Once he stopped dead short in the street, and stood for half a minute. “Underhand?” he murmured, as if questioning himself. “I cannot help it. I must know.” He walked on again sturdily, and reached his goal. He tried his key upon the door. The latch turned easily; but the door was bolted and barred within. He rang the bell; and, after a long pause, he heard the sound of footsteps.

“Who’s there?” asked the voice of the

watchman who slept upon the premises. A little trap-door was pushed open, and the voice added, "Let me have a look at you." The light of a bull's-eye lantern fell through the space left by the trap-door full upon Mr. Lumby's face; and in a changed tone the watchman cried, "Wait one minute, sir. I beg your pardon." Lock and bolt went creaking back, and the door opened. "I never dreamt as it was you, sir," said the man.

"Lock the door again, and light me upstairs," returned the head of the firm.

The man obeyed, and in the little blot of light which dwelt about his feet, Mr. Lumby marched stolidly on through darkness. "Light the gas."—The man obeyed again.—"I shall be here for some hours, perhaps all night. I have important business to do. I may be here to-morrow night, and perhaps again on Wednesday; but my being here is not to be spoken of. You understand?"

"Perfectly, sir," the man responded.

"Very good. Good night."

"Good night, sir;" and the man was gone,

his footsteps sounding lonely on corridor and staircase.

"Now, Garling," muttered Mr. Lumby, as he closed and locked the door, "let us see if you play fair." He pushed aside the sliding panel of corrugated glass between the cashier's room and his own, and entered. On one side of this apartment, raised but one inch from the floor, stood a row of enormous ledgers, dating back many years. These tomes were a yard high, nearly a yard wide, and six or seven inches in thickness. A broad-shouldered solid phalanx, they stood so tightly wedged together that it seemed as if it would have been impossible to squeeze them into the place they occupied if they had been each a leaf thicker. Each bore upon its back in gilt figures the date of the year whose entries it held, the gilding being dull and faded in the earliest volume, and mounting by slow stages through succeeding volumes to the fresh glitter of last year.

Mr. Lumby seized that which dealt with the first year of Garling's stewardship and dragged it from its place. It cost some

effort to do this, and before he had laid the ponderous volume on the table in his own room, his brow was moist. He took off his hat and overcoat, wiped his forehead, and sat down with the book before him. Then casting the great boards open, he sat awhile with knitted brows thinking. Looking through the space where the sliding panel had been, his eyes lighted upon a slender volume standing upon a shelf above the others, and rising, he crossed the room and returned with it. From the pages of the great ledger distilled a musty fungous odour, like the smell of a long-closed vault, or the earthy scent of damp rot in a deserted chamber. There was something depressing in this odour; but he shook the feeling away, and set resolutely to work.

He had wielded in his own hand the destinies of the great house, and in his day he had been a giant among accountants. The faculty was somewhat rusty with long disuse, as even the finest faculties are apt to grow, and he found himself at first less swift and certain than of old. But, as he

laboured, he felt the power growing anew within him ; and in an hour's time he was sweeping over the serried columns at a pace which to most men would have made accuracy impossible. The night sped by, and he still sat there with knitted brows poring over the leaves. The dawn was gray, and the gas-light had grown sickly, when he laid a finger, with a sudden gesture of detection, upon one set of figures at the bottom of a page. His face had been growing more and more anxious for an hour, and now it was keen and hard on a sudden, as though triumph for the moment outweighed the sense of fear.

"Clumsy, after all," he muttered—"clumsy, after all. The old plan. Juggling cross-entries to and fro, as though *that* could fog anybody but a fool."

Looking up, he saw how light the air had grown ; and consulting his watch, he found that it had run down at a few minutes after six o'clock.

"It may be half-past seven by now," he said, under his breath. "I must be away at once."

By instinct, he moved silently in the silent house; and having thrust the great ledger back again into its place, and laid down the slender volume exactly as he found it, he closed the panel, and looked about him to see if there were anything which bore an altered aspect. The gas brackets had not been so drawn out when he came, and he replaced them. He unlocked the door, withdrew the key, locked it on the outer side, and in the dim light felt his way along the corridor and down the stairs. The watchman had opened the large doors, and was smoking a morning pipe outside. The streets were almost in clear daylight, dimly as the dawn had seemed to peep through the office windows.

"Good morning, sir," said the watchman, touching his hat.

"Good morning," returned Mr. Lumby; and pausing, laid a warning finger on the watchman's breast. "Not a word of my having been here—to anybody. I shall be down again to-night at nine."

"Very good, sir," answered the man re-

spectfully ; and his employer, walking sturdily, turned the corner and was gone from sight.

"Theer's somebody up to something," thought the watchman, as he resumed his pipe ; "and the governor's a-finding of 'em out. That's evident.—You've got a pretty tidy berth here, Joseph," apostrophizing himself, "and you know when you're well off, don't you? Very well, then, don't let us hear none o' your chin-music. Of all the disarsterous things as is, onregalated chin-music is the wust. 'Not a word,' says the governor, 'not to nobody.' Very well, then, Joseph, 'not a word' it is !"

Mr. Lumby walked onwards, bound for his hotel. There was a somewhat dazed and unreal sense upon him, born probably of his having been up all night ; and he was not yet nearly so much moved by his discovery as it had seemed probable to himself that he would be if he made it. He had no doubt of the meaning of the discovery. At the beginning of his day of trust, Garling had been deliberately false. Had the falsehood

gone on? or was restitution made, and had he gone honestly since? The question remained still to be decided, but with so large a presumption on the wrong side of it as amounted almost to a moral certainty. What motive could the man have had? What reason in such a case to search for motives? Yet Garling had always, so far as his chief employer knew, lived plainly—more plainly than necessity demanded, and had indeed passed as a saving man, with a tolerable balance at the bank. So much had been said of him currently many years ago. Surely he was too long-headed and keen to gamble. Where could the temptation come from with such a man? In what quarter was he likely to be assailable? It was against Lumby's experience that a man at once saving by nature and prosperous by circumstance should become a swindler. It was not only against experience, but in the very teeth of reason.

And now—how much was likely to be gone? and how much was likely to be recoverable? All this was futile guesswork

for the present; but the business man's heart quaked at the bare thought that enough might be gone to shake the credit of the house. If that were so, he could never forgive himself. For it was he to whom the concerns of the house had been left by his father, and if they had been fatally betrayed, it was he who was to blame. Generation after generation of Lumbys, father and son for a hundred and thirty years, had carried on the house with ever-growing wealth and credit; and if in his day it should sink dishonourably, it would be more than he could bear.

He began to wake to the possible dread of the discovery he had made, but he put it from him. No man could have conceived and carried on without detection a fraud so vast; and yet he had trusted Garling so implicitly, that he had left him the power to gather everything into his own hands, if he had the will to do it, and disappearing suddenly, to leave the concerns of the firm a shapeless wreck and ruin. Was Garling bold and vile enough for such a deed? Who

knew? Was he able enough to do it, if he chose to be a villain? Of that Lumby had no doubt. And there grew up before him the vision of a systematic fraud so carefully planned and so thoroughly executed, that he quailed to think of it. But as this dread seemed to grow more and more possible to his mind, the old man's stout heart rose to meet it. Perhaps it was a petty matter after all—a question of a few hundreds, or at the outside a few thousands; but if it were the deep-laid scheme he feared, he would hoist the wicked engineer with his own petard.

He hungered for the night to come, that he might be back unknown at the books again, to trace the swindle upwards from its birth; and then, fully armed with knowledge, turn upon the man who had planned against his honour and betrayed his trust, and crush him with a word.

The entrance of Mr. Lumby to the hotel was noticed with befitting wonder by the boots at the amazing hour of eight a.m. He had walked the streets for more than half an hour to clear his brain, which was still in

turmoil as he entered and mounted to his bedroom.

“It may take a week—a month—to go through the books and learn everything.” So he mused. “Can I afford to wait so long? Will it not be safest to have him watched? or will he be so keen that a watch may set him off? Shall I take anybody into confidence or track him by myself? Why, if I can do it alone, should I publish my own laxity? I don’t want to be laughed at or pitied by business men in London. ‘Poor old Lumby! smart man once, gone past his time.’ No, no. None of that for me. The scoundrel, trusted as he has been! The fool I was to trust him! Trust no man, no man! The villain! I made him, made him! took him from the gutter almost, and made him a figure in the city—a man of mark. Black ingratitude. The heartless scoundrel! Come, what have I proved against him yet, to be in such a fever? More than enough, more than enough. Oh, the scoundrel—to take him by the elbow when I know all; to take him lightly in a friendly way—‘Garling, the

favour of a word with you.' I think I see him. 'Oblige me by looking at this paper—a calculation for the past nine years.' Is that worth doing? Is that worth waiting for and creeping to through nights of watching? Come, come! I may find that he has been honest since that first year; some pressure may have been upon him. Pressure! He knew well enough that in any extremity he might come to me."

He maddened himself thus, walking up and down his room for a long time, but by-and-by settled into a slow rage of hate and anger infinitely more deadly, and more terrible to endure. In this mood he sat down to think, and found thought beyond him. There was no room in his mind for anything but that slow rage, unless it were an undefined fear of what the rage might lead to; for he felt almost murderous, and some dread of his own passion began to take hold upon him. He had always thought himself a kindly and a merciful man, and in truth he had been so; but he had never had cause to hate or to be greatly angry until now.

The two things that hurt him most were his own imbecility of confidence in the man—for so he called it—and the fact that he himself had bred the creature who so stung him. He had bragged of Garling's trustworthiness—he had promoted him from post to post; he—known as a sound man of business—had so belauded and so trusted Garling that all men had accepted him. How could he blame himself bitterly enough? He raged up and down the room again.

So, now in a whirlwind, and now in a sudden calm, and now back again into the whirlwind, his thoughts fought and wrestled. But one thing became abundantly clear to him. If he desired to survive this blow at all, and still more if he meant to repay it—and he did—he must be calm. And the first way to that was to make up a definite mind as to the course he should take. There was no fear—except a certain phantom fear that would intrude itself however often banished—that Garling could as yet have taken fright. There was little likelihood of his learning of his employer's nightly visits to the

office, and no reason, therefore, for him to think himself suspected. It would be best on all grounds, if it could be safely done, to learn everything before bringing his charge ; and after much doubtful examination, he decided to wait, and, by nightly studies of the books, to learn all that could be learned. But an impulse which seemed merely accidental, threw this resolve to pieces.

He took a bath, and tried to breakfast ; and after a time, returning to his bedroom, carefully darkened the room and lay down to sleep. For some hours sleep seemed unlikely enough, and he did nothing but fight over all the old ground again, passing through new rages and new revengeful pauses of rage ; but at length quite suddenly, as he lay with closed eyes, he fell into a doze, and thence, after some uneasy tossings, into a deep if troubled slumber. When he awoke, the brief spring day was already fading into dusk. He arose refreshed ; and his thoughts instantly recurring to the business before him, he felt a sort of hunger and hurry to begin it, and waited with much impatience for the hour of

nine. It was half because he had named that time to the watchman, that he chose it now; for he was in a mood to be guided by hints of superstition and beginnings of foreboding; but there was solid reason for not going earlier, since on uncertain and irregular occasions the whole staff of clerks stayed late, and it was essential to his purpose to be secret.

The night was raw, and as desolate as only night in a great city can be. There was a filthy mist abroad, bedraggling the lamps and the illuminated windows; and the pavement was slimy to the feet, as though the mist had been beaten and trodden down by the traffic into that consistency. At fretful unavailing war with the mist, there was a miserable wind, maudlin, and moaning its own discomfort, shivering and whimpering in such a fashion as to become trying to the human temper and provoke impatience at its feebleness. Even the most inveterate loungers were within doors to-night, and only misery and business were abroad.

Mr. Lumby walked on stoutly, until, with-

out apparent reason, he came to a sudden halt, and stood staring thoughtfully at the greasy pavement. So far as he could have told, then or afterwards, there was absolutely nothing in his mind to determine him. He had thought the whole matter over, and had decided on his course. And yet in the pause he made he changed his resolution, and, turning to the right, swung straight towards Garling's chambers. Reaching Fleet Street, he began to examine the numbers of the houses, and went peering through the mist and night from door to door. He knew Garling's number, but had forgotten the look of the house, if ever he had known it. As he went on peering from door to door, a cabman, a dozen yards in front of him, came stumbling across the pavement with a canvas-covered box. He placed this on the top of his cab and stood by the door. A girl, closely wrapped against the mist and cold, tripped over the pavement and entered the vehicle. Following her came a man, muffled to the chin, and carrying a satchel of black leather. Crawling slowly along the same side of the

street came a hansom cab, and Mr. Lumby, with bent head and a feigned lameness in his gait, stumped swiftly to it and stayed the driver with a motion of his hand. The hansom pulled up three yards behind the four-wheeler.

"Where to, sir?" asked the foremost driver.

"Waterloo station, main line," said Garling's voice in answer.

Lumby, standing and facing the driver of the other cab, waved to him to be still. The four-wheeler started lumberingly. "Follow," whispered the merchant across the top of the cab. The cabman nodded, and drove slowly in Garling's rear. "Is this the flight?" asked Lumby of himself—"is this the flight?"

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. REGINALD JOLLY and his father walked together in Piccadilly. Mud and mist were the prevailing characteristics of the morning ; the mud oceanic, the mist Scottish, and the general outlook profoundly melancholy. London is the home of wonders, and amongst its store of marvels it is open to question whether there be one greater than the placid endurance of its people. In Stamboul—which is the incapable official's earthly paradise—men bear anything ; but in London, it is singular that we make no rebellion against misrule. There was an Irishman once, who, being informed that for a score of years the bailiff or land-steward in a certain district had not been shot at, excused his countryman on the ground that what was

everybody's business was nobody's business. Perhaps the same proverb applies in other cases ; and anyhow, Piccadilly lay in its usual spring-tide condition.

Good temper is not, in all minds, merely synchronous with boot-polish ; but there are circumstances and conditions in which the one may disappear with the loss of the other. Mr. Jolly, in spite of the weather, had turned out of his chambers in the Albany in a beaming condition. A passing hansom rolled up a sudden wave of mud ; the wave overflowed Mr. Jolly's varnished shoes and spotless gaiters ; the cabman turned and grinned derisively ; a small boy, with that inhuman delight in misery which only small boys feel, danced with joy on the muddy pavement at the sight ; and the injured gentleman, forgetting dignity in anger, made at the juvenile satirist with his cane. But the small boy, surrounding himself with a very halo of mud-splashes, danced behind a lamp-post, and from that place of vantage hurled forth satires too ponderous—so it seemed—for infant tongue to wield ; and Mr. Jolly could

but shake his stick at him in impotent exasperation.

Turning, in anger curiously disproportionate to the event, such as elderly gentlemen are subject to on like occasions, the injured man faced his only son, and read on his undutiful countenance a smile of mirth. At that, with such reproach in his glance as may have stricken Brutus when dying Cæsar breathed "Et tu," he walked in silence to a near cab-stand, and entering the first vehicle he came to, gave the word for home. When Reginald would have entered with him, the aggrieved father voicelessly waved him back, and drove away alone.

The aged-seeming youth stood upon the kerbstone and watched the retreating cab. His smile was half-glad, half-pensive, and he gave the small boy a penny. Then obscuring the remnant of his emotion with an eyeglass, behind which all passions faded to a stony glare, he turned away, and felt a hand upon his shoulder.

"Hillo! How de do?" from Reginald.

"How de do?" from Mr. Gilbert, late

yachting comrade of Val Strange's. "Nice day.—Your governor, wasn't it, who drove away just now?—Thought so.—Which way are you going?"

"I am a waif upon the human sea," responded Reginald, winking behind his eyeglass with much dexterity. "I was going somewhere; but my guide has left me, and I am alone in London, and I don't know where to go."

"Come and lunch with a fellow at the club—just across the road."

"What fellow am I to lunch with?" inquired Reginald.

"Come on," returned Gilbert; and led the way to a ford or crossing, by means of which they passed over the river of mud and came to the club portals.

"Thus," said Reginald later on, waving his hands vaguely at the well-furnished table, the cheerful apartment, and the fire—"thus we pluck sweetness from misfortune, and the grief of the father becomes gladness to the son."—Gilbert, who had seen the disaster to the elder Jolly, smiled, and pushed the claret

across the table. "Strange is in town, I believe," said Reginald, a moment later. "Have you seen him?"

"No," said Gilbert, a slow smile again wreathing itself about his broad features. "Strange and I are at loggerheads." When Gilbert smiled there was this peculiarity about it, that the smile worked underground, so to speak, travelling unseen about his countenance, breaking out at salient points, to disappear again and break out again, now in a wreathing of the lips, now in a twinkle of the eye, until, having permeated the whole mass of his mid-England features, it burst forth all over in a kind of triumph.

"At loggerheads?" said Reginald, fixing his eyeglass in order to reproach him. "Why, I thought you two were the Damon and Pythias of the modern world. And who ever heard of anybody quarrelling with Val Strange?"

"I never quarrelled with him," said Gilbert, with his smile in ambush in his eyes. "I never row with anybody. Not on principle, because I think a fellow ought

to assert himself at times; but because I haven't energy. The fact is, he quarrelled with me."

"What about?" inquired the other.

"I think I have the letter about me somewhere," said Gilbert, pulling out some loose papers. "Yes; here it is."

Reginald took the letter from his outstretched hand. "Am I to read this?"

Gilbert nodded; and his companion, taking down his eyeglass, opened the letter, and read a line or two: "I am in the dullest hole I ever got into in my life," and so forth. At this he turned his eyes to the address from which the writer dated, and saw that this epistle had been forwarded from his father's house. He gave a little gasp at that discovery, and, partly to cover a momentary confusion, read on. When he had read it through, he handed it back to Gilbert. "Did you send the telegram?" he inquired innocently.

Gilbert's slow smile declared itself on his lips, disappeared, shone out in his eyes, disappeared, and beamed suddenly on every

feature. He nodded twice or thrice, and responded, in the phrase of the once-famous Muster Grinnidge's companion: "I believe you, my boy. I sent it. I did more. I went out of my way to oblige him. You see, he asked me not to fail in making the telegram urgent enough to fetch him out of the place he'd got into; and so, thinking the first mightn't seem sufficiently particular, I sent a second; and then—so that there shouldn't be any mistake about it—I sent another. Then he comes up to town, slangs me horribly for overdoing it, and tells me he's done with me for ever. *Trop de zèle*. You catch me ever helping anybody again, and tell me of it."

"You don't happen to know whom Strange was staying with, do you?" asked Reginald.

"No," said Gilbert. "Don't know anybody but Val himself in that part of the country." And Mr. Gilbert indeed was so much a gentleman that, had he known the truth, he would rather have been shot than have betrayed Strange in this manner.—
"Why do you ask? Do you know 'em?"

"Ye-es!" said Reginald, again assuming

his eyeglass, and speaking in a tone of anything but certainty. "I think I do."

"They must be a wooden lot," said Gilbert, "to frighten Strange in that way. In the matter of patient endurance of boredom, I'm a perfect camel, and Val is the next man to me. I never knew anybody who could endure being bored better than Val, except myself, of course. But then, you know," said Gilbert, as if deprecating his own virtues, "I'm so used to it. I can't remember not being bored; everything's a bore to me, and always was, and so, you see, I've had lots of practice."

"Ye-es," said Reginald again. "Must have had."

He was both humiliated and indignant; but, by dint of much self-control, he disguised his feelings, and, turning the conversation to other matters, sat on for an hour, and then took leave. He was eager to be alone, that he might puzzle out this curious affair of Strange's. If it were true that Val had found things dull at the Grange, it was certain that he had borne the infliction in

a marvellously cheerful manner on the whole. Dull? He had been the life of the house—the very centre of all people's enjoyment. Once or twice there might have been a pre-occupied and even a dreary look upon his face—Reginald remembered that—but he had always emerged from his momentary quiet into a very fever of good spirits. There was some small mystery at the bottom of the matter, and the younger Jolly was one of those people to whom mystery is a thing unendurable. There was a fair share of mother-wit hidden in that prematurely bald head of his, and as he sat in deep bewilderment over the whole matter, some uncertain gleams of light began to dawn.

It was evident that Strange must have been intensely eager to get away, before he would have written such a letter to Gilbert. It was equally evident that the reason he gave was not the true one. It was plain, also, that when the telegram arrived which should have been his excuse for leaving, he had changed his mind, and did not want to go. The complete pretence of the excuse

was proved by his immediate return, when at last the third telegram forced him away. This, then, was clear—that at the Grange, at the time of Val's stay, there was some unusual attraction and some equally unusual repulsion. Reginald cudgelled his brains to remember whether anybody who might have been disagreeable to Strange had left the house between the writing of the letter and the receipt of the telegram. No. There was nobody leaving at that time. Had anybody arrived who brought a new attraction to the place, and made him eager to return? No. Then the attraction and the repulsion existed there together. How?

When the present writer was very young indeed, he was in love, in a quite hopeless manner, with a lady whose years probably doubled his own. The lady was perhaps two and twenty, and is at this time elderly, and indeed a grandmother. The present writer was permitted to make one of a water-party, and, to his own ecstatic delight, was relegated to the boat in which the object of his unspoken adoration sat with a younger

sister. It was a large boat; and there were several young men, who wore high collars, and otherwise made open proclamation of achieved manhood, told off to it; but there were no other ladies. One of the young men had the celestial happiness to be the brother of my adored. Unmindful of that splendid privilege, he called to the occupants of another boat, complaining of the inequality of distribution. My hated rival, who was two and thirty, turned upon him: "It's all right, Tom. We have your sisters. Don't ask any more ladies here!"—"Don't ask any more?" said the other. "Sisters?" It was spoken with extreme disdain. "What do you think a fellow wants with his sisters at a picnic?" This was my first lesson in a phase of nature which I have since studied with some care. It impressed me all the more because it was uttered in respect to such a sister; and the moral I deduce from it, and from my after-studies, is this: that, as a rule, a brother is ignorant—is even ridiculously ignorant—of his sister's fascinations for other people. He is prepared to

admit the attractions of other men's sisters—they appeal to him: he is not altogether amazed that a man should marry or desire to marry his sister; but if the future brother-in-law, in a flush of that foolish fever under which he labours, should chance to pour out his thoughts of his divinity, it seems—confess it—a little ridiculous to the divinity's brother. Those lambent orbs in which the soul is made visible for the first and last time in this world for you or me—"item," saith the brother, "a gray eye or so." Her sigh melts him not, her glance commands him not, he will grin superior at your raptures; had it been Susan, now—your sister, he could have understood it.

Any other man knowing all that Reginald knew, and having but half his readiness of observation, would have jumped to the truth at once. It may be accepted as proof of considerable keenness that he reached the truth at all. It was a slow and doubtful process; but he mastered the problem at length, and was satisfied that his solution was the true one. It troubled him on many grounds. He

had grown into a great liking for Gerard, and had long had the sincerest friendship for Strange. And he himself was proud, and, in respect to some matters, loftily honourable. The British undergraduate has, if you take him in the lump, fewer of the Christian virtues than you might wish to find in him ; but some of the mere heathen virtues are an absolute part of him, and men who have them not he despises, and from his soul abhors. Reginald, in his friendship for Val Strange, began to grow desperately fearful for him. It was remarkable, having once made up his mind to the reason of Val's astonishing behaviour in the matter of the telegrams, how true an allowance of the impulses which guided all three of the people involved he was able to make. He adjudged to Gerard, at once, the unsuspecting single-heartedness which belonged to him ; to Constance, the honour which baffled inclination ; and to Strange, the weakness which made his passion so dangerously strong. He resolved to watch, even to make opportunities for watching ; and if the result should confirm his thoughts, to speak.

Constance was staying with Mr. Jolly's maiden sister, who lived in a small house at a large rental in Chesterfield Street, Mayfair; and thither Reginald drove before dinner that evening, resolved on what should seem a call of duty on the maiden aunt. To his profound amazement, he found Strange there, settled apparently as a friend of the household. He glared at him with unveiled surprise, and Val himself looked almost as guilty as he felt.

"Why, what," cried the startled new-comer, "in the name of all the wonders, brings you here?"

"Reginald!" said the maiden aunt, with some severity.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear," said Reginald in response. "Strange and I are old friends." He kissed the withered cheek dutifully, as he had always done, and nodded at Constance. He was himself again.

"How is papa?" inquired Constance.

"Drowned, drowned, drowned, as the Queen in Hamlet says," returned the flippant young man; and proceeded to relate the

little episode of the morning. His eyes wandered from Strange to Constance, and from Constance to Strange, and he watched and speculated as he chattered. The mere insertion of his eyeglass seemed to lend him a certain sublime stoniness of visage. Sphinx-like, as the poet paints the Sphinx—"gazing right on with calm unseeing eyes"—he watched everything in seeming to watch nothing; and being a born diplomatist, he abstracted himself gradually from Strange and Constance, and gave himself wholly over to the amusement of the old lady. But, for whatever reason, the two made no sign, and seemed, indeed, even a little bored with each other, and aweary of the world. Reginald, confident in the freedom he could take, determined to sit out the term of Val's visit, and having accomplished that feat, and driven Strange into rising, he also arose.

"We'll go together," he said quietly.

Val, being unable to find a reason for sitting down again, abused himself inwardly for not having exercised another minute's patience; not guessing that in that cause

Reginald would have willingly sat there for a week. Unimpressible, and even stupid as he contrived to look behind his glass, the little man noted everything. In Strange's farewell to Constance there was something of an appeal, a touch so fine, that the best of actors would have been put to it to copy the manner of it. Constance's manner was chilly; but her bosom gave one long heave, and she paled and trembled ever so little as she said "Good-bye" and gave him her hand. These signs were so delicate in themselves, that in expressing them, however slightly, there is a fear of exaggeration; but the keen though vacuous-looking eye behind the eye-glass took in all, and the youth made his own conclusions.

"Valentine Strange," he said, pausing in the street a few seconds later, and tapping his friend lightly on the breast, "I want to speak to you."

Val looked at him quietly. "What is it?"

"Come with me to your own rooms," said Reginald. "We can be quiet there."

Val, with a little sinking at the heart, foreboding what was coming, nodded in assent; and, having summoned a hansom, they were trundled along with scarcely a word between them.

"Now," said Strange, turning upon him when his rooms were reached, "what is it?" The air was dusky, but there was a fire aglow upon the hearth by which the two could read each other's faces.

"Got any baccy?" asked the younger.— "Thank you." He chose a pipe from the rack above the mantelpiece, and having filled and lit it, sat down gravely and smoked, with both hands stretched out to the red gleam of the fire.

"What is it?" Strange asked again, this time with some impatience.

"You remember kicking Davis in the Fives Court?" asked Reginald, with apparent irrelevance.

"Yes," said Strange, breathing tightly, and not knowing what to make of this beginning; "what about it?"

"Remember the fight that came after it?"

"Perfectly," said Val, trying to laugh, and not succeeding very brilliantly.

"Remember what it was all about?"

"Certainly. What of it?"

"You did me a royal good turn that day," said Reginald. "It's twelve years ago, ain't it? We've been close chums ever since that time, haven't we, Val? And that was the beginning of it. Very well. You've always been stronger and richer and luckier and handsomer than me—haven't you? Very well, again."

"You have not been drinking, have you?" asked Strange.

"Half a pint of claret at luncheon," said the little man, with his eyes on the red glow of the fire. "We've been chums for twelve years. You began by licking an enemy of mine, and you've gone on with all manner of kindnesses ever since. And now I'm going to show my gratitude. You're not the Valentine Strange you used to be. There's something on your mind. Will you tell me what it is, Val, or shall I tell you?"—Strange sat in silence.—"Remember, Val,"

said his companion, lifting his gaze from the fire and looking full in Val's eyes across the semi-darkness of the place, "this is the first chance of doing you a turn I've had. I give you notice that I'm going to take it—mercilessly."

"That half-pint," said Val, "was longer or stronger than common. Have a nap."

"Am I to tell you what it is?" asked Reginald, with no alteration in his tone, and with his eyes still fixed on his companion; "or will you tell me?"

"Oh!" cried Val, in a tone of easy impatience and derision, "let us have it. Let me get a light.—And now, go ahead. I'm waiting." He threw both legs over the arm of his chair, and slipped back, so that his face fell into darkness.

In answer to this movement, the little man arose and lit the gas before he spoke another word.

Strange came uneasily back into his former posture. "Confound your mystery!" he cried. "What have you to say?"

"I have something to say," returned the

other, "that I don't want to say. Something I tremendously dislike to say. Something I must say, unless you'll say it for me."—Strange's only answer was to cast his hands resignedly abroad. Reginald stood upon the hearthrug before him, and had the advantage, unusual with him, of looking at Strange from a superior height. It is remarkable how that tells in a discussion—with some people.—Now, will you tell me, Val—you, an honourable man—will you tell me on your word of honour that you have no guess of what I mean?"

"You little lunatic," said Strange, with an affectation of good-humoured raillery, "how should I tell?"

"Val," said the little man feelingly, "you don't know how much I know."—At that, Strange started and turned pale. Was it possible that Constance, dreading herself, had besought her brother's interference.—"Suppose," the little man continued, "that I had met your friend Gilbert—East?"

He threw just a trifle of malice into the pause, for he was angry with Strange for

that deception. Strange moved again, and blushed. This was changing the attack altogether, and though the shaft hit him smartly, he could bear it. If the letter to Gilbert were all the mystery, he thought he could make his peace.

"Suppose," Reginald went on, "that I had put two and two together, with a result confirmed again this afternoon? Val, for pity's sake, don't make me fool about in this way any longer. Tell me you understand me."

"Well," said Val suddenly, with a desperate voice and a face of pallor, "I understand you. Go on."

"Thank you," said the accuser, holding out his hand.—Strange took it and pressed it hard, though he hung his head.—"That's like you, Val. That's honest. I'm very sorry, very sorry—sorrier than I can say. But you're too late, Val. And you're a man of honour, and I'm a man of honour. And—he's a friend of yours too, Val. Now, it's all over, isn't it?"

"Rags, old man," groaned Val, still holding his hand, and speaking with his head

still bent, "she doesn't care for him!—not a straw!"

The little man gripped Val's hand harder as he responded: "We're both men of honour, and we're friends, Val—friends. We can't have her talked about. The other man's in his right. She took him with her eyes open, and you came too late. You came in last. Well, you'll find another race that'll be better worth winning in."—There was no answer to this, except a groan and a harder grip of the hand.—"Faithful are the wounds of a friend," said Reginald; "but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful. Run away from it. That's the best thing you can do. Make a bolt—at once."

"Yes," said Val, stricken to the heart, "I'll go.—But," he added, lifting his head and showing a face so changed, that his companion was amazed and half frightened by it, "it will be as hard for——" He checked himself there, but the tone told all.

"The more need to go, if that's the case," said Reginald, hardening himself. "Honour, Val! honour!"

"I know it will be," cried Val, rising and casting his arms upon the mantelpiece. He looked round with haggard eyes. "I know it!" he cried again, and dropped his head upon his arms.

"How do you know it?" asked the other, almost sternly. "Val! you haven't—spoken to her?"

"What do you think of me?" cried the miserable Val, not daring to confess. "But I know it."

"I've never been hit in this way," said the young philosopher, laying a friendly hand on Strange's shoulder; "but I suppose I shall take pot-luck with the others when the time comes. And if men and books speak the truth, the only courage is to run away, in such a case as this. Start at once. Go to Naples."

"I'm sick of Naples," said Val, raising his head drearily. "But I'll get away somewhere, and I'll catch the tidal train to-night. Will you—will you say I'm gone?"

"Yes," answered Reginald, moved by his friend's trouble. "And Strange, look here!

Stop away till it's all over. There's a good fellow. We shall have you back as jolly as a sand-boy in a few months' time. And I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll go to Bassano's and have a room to ourselves, and dine together, and I'll see you off."

"Do you want to watch me?" asked Val bitterly.

"That's not like you," said the little man, reaching up and putting a hand on each of his friend's shoulders. "I want to cheer you up a bit."

Strange rang his bell, and ordered his servant to pack for the continent and book for Southampton.

"I'll go there to-night, and start for somewhere," he said recklessly. "Come on. Let's go to dinner."

He rattled away in an almost hysterical fashion until the time for parting came. But when Reginald had shaken hands with him, as the train moved from the platform, and had withdrawn his hand, he felt that there were tears upon it.

CHAPTER XV.

"AND so," said Garling, as he and Hiram walked together, "you have the whip-hand of me?"

"That," said Hiram with great gravity, "is so."

"I am not accustomed to harness," observed Garling, with his own grim smile, "and you will make little progress by driving me too hard. Before we go farther, I have something to say. Shall we talk here? We can have quiet." He pointed to a court upon the left hand; and without waiting for an answer, led the way, passing through a low-browed door with a sunken step, along a sawdusted passage, and into a room, the atmosphere of which was dense with stale tobacco-smoke. Seating himself at a battered and discoloured little circular table, he

motioned Hiram to follow his example. By this time Garling was as cool and self-possessed as ever, and his manner was simply business-like. "And now, Mr. Search—that is your name, I believe—before you drive me farther, I must have a little talk with you."

"Well," returned Hiram, "there's biblical precedent. Dare say you remember Balaam. Go ahead, sir."

"You are in good spirits," said Garling quite agreeably. "That is natural. But the best players are those whose spirits neither mount with gains nor fall at losses. Forgive me if I seem to lecture you; but since we are to hold a relationship so close as that of father and son, I can scarcely fail to feel a little proprietary right in you."

The smile with which Garling accompanied these words was such a compound of craft and mirth and malice as Hiram had never seen before. The younger man nodded with an answering smile, and for half a minute the two sat thus looking at each other, the cashier smiling—as Hiram said long after—

wards in telling the story—"like an octopus," and the other beaming back at him.

"This is quite an agreeable meeting," said Garling, darkening suddenly. He went on abruptly: "You have an object to achieve, and so have I. It is in your power to put me to much inconvenience—to an inconvenience to which I would not voluntarily submit—I am quite candid, you observe—for a thousand pounds. But, on the other hand, it is in my power to inflict upon you, by submitting to that inconvenience, a disappointment which would, I presume, be considerable. You admit that?"

"Yes," returned Hiram; "I admit that."

A waiter with weak eyes, disorganized hair, and a dissipated-looking suit of evening clothes, here entered. The waiter's garb had the look—common to dress-clothes worn in the daytime—of having been up all night; but the waiter himself had a contradictory appearance of having only just got out of bed.

"Did you ring, gentlemen?" inquired the waiter forlornly.

"We did not," said Garling, resuming his smile. "I suppose we ought to have done so.—May I offer you any little refreshment, son-in-law? A little brandy? A glass of wine?—No?—I will take a little brandy, waiter, pale and cold."

"Bring me a cigar," said Hiram; and the waiter made his exit, like a troubled ghost who found it a relief to be laid.—"I admit that," said Hiram again, nodding across the table, as a hint to Garling to go on.

"Now, I am naturally a stubborn man, Mr. Search," said the cashier, resuming, "and I have a great dislike to being driven. You observe that I am candid with you? If I should find myself being driven too hard, I should probably kick over the traces. Now, that would be quite a melancholy thing for both of us. You would fulfil your threat; I should put my power into action; we should each be injured irreparably, and at daggers-drawn for the rest of our lives."

"It is a theme," said Hiram, "for one of the gentlemen who paint your coats of arms. Balaam right, quadruped left, and each with

a drawn dagger." He said this musingly, eyeing Garling meanwhile with pleased contentment.

"You are pleased to be facetious," said the cashier, looking at him from under beetling brows, but smiling still. So the Putney Chicken and Hammersmith Pet were wont to smile on each other, each with wicked patience waiting for his chance to plant a blow. The waiter came in at this juncture, ghost-like, and being again laid, by the magic of a half-crown, fluttered off again, and once more made an appearance, and having, like the ghosts in legendary story, surrendered treasure, vanished finally. "You see, Mr. Search," said Garling, comfortably sipping at his brandy-and-water, "that it will be unwise to drive too hard."

"I am not particular about the pace," said Hiram, biting off the end of his cigar, and looking complacently at his companion; "but I am bent on going all the way.—But come, now, mister. We can get along without being so lovely figurative, I reckon. Move on, and say straight out what you want."

"I will admit you," said Garling, "to visit my daughter at any reasonable hours at which she cares to see you. If her mind is set upon it, I shall throw no obstacle in the way of your union."

"That's very good of you," said Hiram drily.

"Not at all," returned Garling, with superior dryness. "So far, I am driven. At present, Mr. Search, my daughter informs me—for I need no longer disguise from you the fact that I have talked with her upon this topic—that your occupation is that of a 'bus conductor. Permit me to indicate that I shall take a good deal of driving before I consent to allow my only child to marry a man who occupies such a position. Understand, sir. I am to some extent in your power. To a certain extent—understand me clearly—you can force me. Beyond that line, I will not go. You shall have free access to my daughter's society at reasonable times and in my presence. I shall place no impediment in the way of your ultimate union. But before that can come about, your

social position must be much improved. If you accede to my terms, I shall not be unwilling to assist you in the effort to improve it. I do not think you can care to demand more than this at present; and I warn you that I will not yield a point beyond."

There he paused, sipped his brandy-and-water with a keen and secret glance at Hiram's face, and, throwing one leg across the other, awaited a reply.

Hiram for his part pulled placidly at his cigar, and turned things over in his mind a little before he answered.

"Good," he said at length—"good, in all respects bar one. We air so amiable and loving-tempered both of us, that you don't mind my being candid. Two is company—three ain't."

"When you have tried my plan," said Garling, "your power will be no less than it is now. Be content with what you have. Let me have the satisfaction of knowing that I retire gracefully."

"Cupid," said Hiram, looking at him musingly, "is really not a part that you'd

look pretty in. No, sir; it is not a part to suit your style."

Garling accepted this uncomplimentary statement without any change of countenance or sign of displeasure. "Let me have a day or two in which to think that matter over, Mr. Search." That was all he said. There was no denying that he took defeat pluckily; and Hiram began to admire his courage and endurance.

"Mister," he returned, "I have trapped a good many creatures of different sorts in various regions; but I never trapped a man afore. Most of 'em raved a good deal, and took it wild; some of 'em took it sulky. Now, you take it like a man, and I esteem you for it—I do. And I shall meet you fair, in consequence. Pro tempore, the arrangement you suggest will fit the present-speaking Christian, easy. I've got my turn to serve; but I don't care about doin' more than serve it, and so I'll close with this remark—I shan't ride rusty so long as you go easy. But try to slip, try one dodge, and I am down, sir, like a fifty-ton steam Nasmyth hammer. Now you know."

"Having arrived at that pleasant mutual understanding," said the cashier calmly, "we may part for the present, I presume."

"Not yet," returned Hiram. "We'll go a piece up Fleet Street, if you please."

The cashier assenting with a shrug of the shoulders, arose and left the room, and Hiram followed. In this order they traversed Ludgate Hill and Fleet Street, the cashier going foremost with bent head and hands folded behind him, looking unconscious of the figure in his rear; and Hiram with his head in the air, sucking smilingly at his cigar, coming on at an easy saunter, as though he had never seen Garling in his life before. Drawing near his own residence, the leader produced his keys, and having unlocked the door, admitted his companion.

"I forgot to mention one thing, Mr. Search," he said, as they stood together at the foot of the stairs. "My daughter must necessarily know the arrangement we have come to, but she must not know why we have arrived at it. Any hint on your part that you have any control over me will dissolve

our bargain, and I will take the consequences. You understand me?"

"Yes."

"And you agree?"

"Certainly."

"You will respect all my private affairs so far as she is concerned?"

"I will," said Hiram simply.

The cashier moved on again, and selecting a new key, unlocked the door at the head of the stairs. As he did so, a smile, against which he had fought his hardest for the last five minutes, broke out in his eyes and wreathed his features—a smile so cunning and triumphant, that if his companion had seen it, he would surely have found a warning in it. He did not see it; but as Garling feigned to fumble at the lock, in order to make time to smooth his face, Hiram laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Here's another part of the bargain," he said severely—"I won't have her kept a prisoner."

"There is no longer any need," answered Garling, throwing open the door. His face

was calm again, but there was still a light of triumph in his eyes which made him fear to show them. As he lifted his face momentarily on entering the room, his daughter saw upon it that new look, and for a moment wondered. But she had little time or inclination to question it; for there—wonder of wonders—at this cruel father's heels came Hiram, her hero, her lover, her man of men! Was the cruel father a good father, after all? She took one hurried step towards her lover, and her pale cheek flushed and her bosom heaved. Then she stood still, with her hands a little stretched towards him; and Hiram, coming boldly in, took her in his arms and kissed her, and laid her poor pale little face against his waistcoat, whilst she cried for joy. Beholding this, Garling walked to the window, as if he would not willingly be too much in the way. Oh, Hiram, travelled citizen, 'cutest of omnibus conductors, cool and cunning and brave, you will have need of cunning and of swiftness to overreach the owner of the crafty eyes that look out on Fleet Street whilst you pet your innocent treasure and make much of her!

Or else what means that most triumphant smile which shines out broadly in those crafty eyes? Be wary, Hiram! And you too, Garling, swift of mental fence, triumphing, be you wary, lest, in an hour you know not, the solid way before you shake, and yawn and engulf you. Crime-built castles are unsteadfast, Garling. Beware your ears, should the flawless walls come down at a run, as walls so built are like to do. No; Garling has no fears.

Mary, withdrawing herself shyly from Hiram's arms, looked from one to another of this curiously assorted pair—her father and her sweetheart—in a palpitating, happy, yet half-fearful wonder. Garling still looking out of the window, hiding his smile, Hiram answered her glances.

"My dear, I have had a talk with your father. He is willing to allow me to wait on you, and he promises not to throw anything between us——"

"It is out of the question," broke in Garling smoothly, speaking with his face turned to the window, "that Mr. Search should

dream of marriage whilst occupying his present position. I shall find something for him to do, however, I dare say, and in that I may perhaps have to rely upon your assistance, Mary." The smile flashed out again exultant as he said this ; but, by a great effort, he suppressed it, and turned upon them both his ordinary face of down-looking secrecy. "In the mean time, it is enough to say that I withdraw my opposition to Mr. Search, and that I leave you and him to settle matters between you. With this understanding—that nothing shall be hidden, but all clear, honourable, and above-board."

He looked a singular advocate for openness of conduct, as he stood there with his furtive hands behind him, and his secret eyes in ambush beneath his beetling brows ; but Mary had no suspicion of him ; and Hiram, though he knew his man pretty fairly, held him in his power, and could always shake his knowledge over him. In a little while Garling drew out his watch, and remarking that he had business to attend to, arose, with a meaning look towards Hiram, who, not

being anxious to disturb the seeming concord or to assert his power too soon, rose also, and, after a tender farewell, departed with his host.

"You will write to me?" Mary whispered, following to the door.

"Yes, my darling—yes," said Hiram, and was gone. The girl stayed behind happy, and Hiram walked away happy, at the new condition of affairs.

Garling went his own way triumphant.

"Had this happened six months ago, it might have cost some trouble," he thought as he went along, with his head bent and his hands clasped behind him. "Had it happened a month back, it might have inclined me to hurry. But happening now, when everything is ready, it comes as a little welcome excitement, and keeps one from thinking too much of other matters.—And you have the whip-hand over me, have you, Mr. Search? It was not worth while to give the fellow into custody, and the affair might have got into the papers a day too soon. As it is, I have had my sport and gained

my point into the bargain. Did you never trap a man before this, my astute American friend? Look at your trap next week.—I played him well,” he thought smilingly. “It was high comedy. I take some credit for the gravity of my yielding, the solemn bargaining of the capitulation. I declare, Garling,” he told himself in secret exultation, “you have a sense of humour even yet. And that ignoramus thought to harness me! Tcha!” he snarled aloud, in vast contempt, and walked on, respected—many a City clerk looking reverently at the great manager, many a City magnate owing to himself: “A clever fellow that. Close, but a jewel!”

“Mr. Lumby is waiting in his room, sir,” said a clerk, as the cashier passed through the offices.

“No, sir,” said another; “he left five minutes ago.”

“Ah!” said Garling, throwing the words across his shoulder as he walked, “I shall be here if he returns!”

Mr. Lumby did not return; and the cashier sat among his papers, and did his work

deftly, with wonderful rapidity and accuracy in combination. Practice, says the adage, makes perfect. That is partly true even to dull men; but given a genius for the thing practised, and it comes true literally. Came a tangle—his hand unravelled it. Anything wrong—his eye detected it. “Here is the flaw.” The great piles of correspondence and sheets of figures to be examined melted before him. The piles examined grew and grew. It was a pity that he was a scoundrel.

It is related that a Greek father took his son to a merchant and proudly introduced him as “the greatest liar in the Levant.” And the chronicler adds that the merchant accepted of the youth’s service with tears of joy. In the West we have got into a habit of regarding probity as a business essential. In all but honesty, Garling was a very pearl among business men. But what a “but”!

The night came. He could count the nights now for which it would be essential to remain for the completion of his plans. They were growing few, and, in spite of the

man's colossal composure, were growing terrible to endure. For it was not yet too late to restore all, and be honest, and yet well-to-do, and Conscience whispered sometimes that life would be sweeter so. It was no vulgar crime that he had planned, as it was no vulgar criminal who planned it. Here, for now nine years, had he worked patiently and gently, unloosening every here and there with subtlest fingers a tie which held complete control from him, and gradually drawing every string of the vast concern into his own hands. Then feeding his own resources slowly from those of the firm, and, if needful, feeding the firm again from the fund thus fraudulently acquired, swelling his wicked gains year by year, and always fending off the crash to make his gains the larger; he had played his game so long that at last everything was his, and the great house of Lumby and Lumby was a bubble which would burst so soon as he shook it from his finger. There was nothing more to be got; the egg was sucked dry, the nut scraped clean out of the shell; and he waited merely for the

transfer of his own legally acquired belongings to Spain, the swindler's refuge.

Now, as the time drew near, he adopted any precaution, no matter how ridiculous it seemed, that occurred to him; and on this night he took a little packet of cigar-ash from his purse, and strewed a tiny pinch on the top of every one of those gigantic ledgers in which his wicked secret slept. Even as he did this, he sneered at himself, and mocked the fears which prompted him.

"And yet," he muttered, "why should I be so infatuated as to miss any precaution I can think of? The books are not likely to be moved; but if they should be I shall know it now."

There was a triumph in his heart, though it had to share its home with fear. He had fought against the world single-handed, and he was winning. Most crimes spring from egotism; and Garling's egotism was too great to leave the rest of the world the barest elbow-room. In his self-centred lonely life, this many a year, he had schooled himself thoroughly in that devil's creed of

Number One, which never needed teaching, and is taught so widely. You and I who go about diffusing our sympathies on other people, miss the selfish, lonely raptures which warm the heart of the true egotist. He is not merely Gulliver in a Lilliput, to his own feeling, but he is so without the shadow of a reason; for egotism and vanity may be, and often are, as separate as the poles; and he knows himself no taller, no wittier, no wiser, no handsomer, than the rest of mankind; but he is He, and that stupendous fact raises him until his forehead strikes the stars. He is the central fact of the universe. Round him men and circumstances revolve, ministering to his comfort, or afflicting his bones. If Nature raise a tornado, it is on purpose to wreck his paper-boat in a gutter. Should a trampled people, after long centuries of groaning, rise and tear the oppressor from his place of power, it is to depreciate the value of his shares in the market. If anything affect him not, it is nothing, though it wreck or build a world. And when a man who is thus armed, as in

triple brass, against the woes of others and their joys, is cursed with the good gift of brains, he may scourge a continent like the great Bonaparte; or wreck a business firm or so, and break a trusting heart or two, like Garling.

Mary's life had been on the whole so dull, that a little sunshine went a long way with her. Her father's unexpected yielding had let in so broad and warm a gleam upon her darkened life, that in the few hours that passed between his going and his coming, the girl's heart had opened like a flower. When he returned that night, sunk deep in his own secrecy, and a world's width away from her in his desert egotism, she gave him a shy and tender welcome, and fluttered about him with shy and tender ways. His heart had no door for her, and her attentions stung him. He bade her go to bed; and when she obeyed him, he kept his place with folded arms by the dull fire, and hugged himself, and worshipped his own triumph.

Suddenly, as if a peal of thunder had

broken in on music, one thought crashed through him, and brought him to his feet. What if his employer had heard the talk in his room that afternoon ! Amazing, that he had never thought of that before. It was enough, had he heard it, to arouse suspicion, though Trust had drugged her dead ! Then fear took hold of him, and terror encompassed him. But he was not a man to be cowed, and could face even the phantoms from his own abysses until now ; and his stout courage had beaten down his fears long before his nerves had ceased to twitch and tremble at them. In these matters the soul is like the wind, and the body like the sea. A child, chidden for a fault, falls asleep crying, and his pure mind runs into pure dreams, and his little heart is glad ; but however the wind has fallen, the sea still heaves. You may hear him sobbing, though he smiles in his dream. And this elderly scoundrel's nerves still twitched and trembled, though his heart had grown stout again.

“If I am caught at the last,” he said,

“and lose the game I have played, what do I lose? The game, and only the game. Credit and liberty are mine still, and I am as well-to-do as honesty could have made me. There lies a quarter of a million safely housed in the bank at Madrid, and accessible to me only. I am caught? Well and good. ‘Let me go again, if you please, for, though you hang and quarter me, you touch none of your money.’ Like other men, I have dreamed my dream, and I waken. Dream? It is no dream! What time remains for detection? I can be away at any hour. Why stay at all? Why stay?”

He took a Bradshaw from the table and studied it. There was a night train set down here, leaving Waterloo Station for Southampton at half-past nine o'clock. A steam-packet for Cadiz was set down for the ninth and twenty-fourth of each month. This was the twenty-second. He decided in a flash. Whatever pretence of business was to be done to-morrow at the office he would do, and be away by that night train. So then, at last, the time was here; looked

forward to for years, and terrible now it came. As he sat beside the fire, he could see the office going on for an hour or two, even a day or two without him—everybody going on in the old routine ; and then, scared and astonished faces, whisperings, fears, amazement, the principals summoned ; a meeting with the bank manager, everybody present grave and pale—and then, the crash, and he on the seas far out of reach, or safely housed at Madrid.

“Let me see,” he mused again, “I must give myself what law I can.” He sat at the table, and wrote on the firm’s paper one letter, running thus :

MEMORANDUM.

To MESSRS. HUTCHINSON and Co., Liverpool.

Kindly read enclosed, and if it suit your views, indorse, and forward to Parrivacini and Co., Buenos Ayres.

Then, on plain letter-paper, he wrote, dating from his own chambers :

SIR,

Pray excuse my absence for a day. I am called away by private business of a most urgent and particular nature.

Yours respectfully,

E. GARLING.

This epistle was intended for Mr. Lumby, at the offices of the firm. He enclosed it in an addressed envelope, which he stamped, and left open. Then putting both it and the memorandum in another envelope, he addressed it to Messrs. Hutchinson and Co., of Liverpool, and posted it at once with his own hand.

"Lawson will open it," said Garling with a smile as he turned homewards again, "and thinking he sees a blunder, will post the enclosure at once. It will reach London, bearing the Liverpool postmark, on Wednesday morning. If there should be any suspicion, the postmark will send them to Liverpool, whilst I am at the other end of the country."

Lawson was the manager of the firm to

which this ingenious blind was addressed; and so excited was Garling's imagination at this time, that to think of Lawson was to see him,—seated in his own room, smiling gravely at the supposed blunder by which the wrong letter had been enclosed to him. The enclosure was not in Garling's usual neat and trim calligraphy, but was written at headlong speed, to look hasty and flurried.

"If it gives me but the day's law, it will serve my turn," said the cashier, as he stood before his dying fire again.

The night was late by this time, and the tide of life in the city's streets ran low. He sat for a while, listening to the fainter tones of traffic, and busy with the trifles of his scheme. The railway station with its hurrying crowds, its gleam of light and gloom of shadow, the guard's lamp waving, the train moving. The packet with its deck aswarm with life, the signal given, the hand-shakings and embraces; the ship in motion on dark waters, the lights of the town twinkling lower and lower, the long rolling of the open sea. He saw these things as he sat there.

It was vain to strive to sleep, so he heaped on more coals, and sat out the night, busy with trifles all the time. The night wore by, and the dawn looked in miserably; and, after a time, Garling heard the step of the laundress on the stairs, and retreated to his bedroom, where he bathed and shaved and dressed, emerging a little paler than ordinary, but not much. At the usual time, he went to the offices and to his own room there. The common routine of business done, he inspected the enormous ledgers which lined the room, mechanically pursuing the precaution of the previous night, whilst in his heart he laughed at it. But it weakened his knees beneath him to see that from one of those volumes the dust so carefully strewn had vanished. It was but a child's precaution, and yet it had discovered something.

"No creature has the keys but him and me," said the cashier in a hoarse inward murmur. "Is the hunt afoot already? Was that fool overheard here yesterday?" And, for all his courage, a cold perspiration burst out upon his forehead. But no man guessed his

troubles, and no man watched his movements as he went in and out. He walked to his bankers. "Why should I finesse and wait, even if I had time?" he asked himself, and went calmly in and demanded to see the manager, by whom he was received with marked respect. "Do you know," asked Garling, closeted with the manager, "what people are saying about your affairs here?" The stroke he was prepared for was insolent in its audacity.

"What are they saying?" asked the manager in surprise.

"You will learn soon enough," answered Garling. "I am getting nervous, perhaps; but I have the savings of my lifetime here, and I can't afford to risk them. I want to close my account."

The manager looked thunderstruck, and assured him that if any damaging rumours were afloat, they were utterly unfounded.

"Perhaps I am nervous," said Garling; "but I will close my account, if you please."

The official demurred. It was not courteous or business-like. Fears were preposterous.

"I will close my account, if you please," reiterated Garling. "Unless," he added, "you give me authority to spread the rumours."

"Very well," said the manager, half wrathful, half amazed; and Garling received his money—five or six thousand pounds—his own, honestly his own, every penny of it—put it, mostly in Bank of England notes for one hundred pounds apiece, into a black leather satchel, and went his way.

"I have shut his mouth," thought the cashier, with his own smile. "He will spread no rumour against the bank, however preposterous it may be."

He went home, and found his daughter there, sewing.

"Mary," he said, with placid gravity, "I have a piece of good news for you."—She looked at him silently, with a half-smile. She was beginning to think he meant kindly by her.—"I have found a place for Mr. Search. It is in Southampton. Will you come there with me to-night? I want to take a house for him, and give him a surprise when he comes down to his new situation."

And this was the man she had thought so cruel! She would have overwhelmed him by her thanks; but he stopped her.

"You will know better in a day or two for what you have to thank me," he said, meaning it quite truly, though the words carried a different sense to the speaker and the hearer. Then, locking his precious bag in his own room, he told her to have all things packed and ready by nine o'clock; and she having promised, he went to the offices again and bided his time. Cold and hard, and grimly self-possessed as he looked, he suffered torments of suspense and dread. But he bided his time, and got through his routine, and finally went his way, leaving the mine to explode, and the house which had nourished him to fall in ruins. And there was not a touch of ruth, or pity, or repentance in him.

At nine o'clock, he had a four-wheeled cab at his door, and the start was made in ample time. Familiar Fleet Street rumbled past him. He would never tread its pavement any more, but there would be rare talk

of him there in a day or two. Let them talk—whoever chose! He had a quarter of a million sterling out in Spain, and he could afford to be talked of. Waterloo Road. The bridge with the river flowing dark below it. The station with its hurrying crowds. He had seen them all last night, in fancy so vivid they had all seemed real. He saw them in reality now, and they all seemed like a dream.

Mary was already seated in the railway carriage, and he was standing at the door with the black bag in his hand. Except for his daughter, the carriage was untenanted, and he laid the bag on the seat, and for one moment looked round, asking dimly if this were really a farewell to London. The guard's lamp waved, the whistle sounded, and Garling's foot was on the step of the carriage, when a hand with a grip of iron took him by the arm.

"One word with you before you go, Garling."

The cashier's head turned more like that of an automaton than of a living creature.

"Are you going?" cried the guard.

"No!" said the head of the house of Lumby and Lumby, with his grasp tightening on Garling's arm. The two men—defrauded and defrauder—looked each other in the eyes. One read guilt, and the other suspicion bursting into certainty. The train started.

CHAPTER XVI.

VAL STRANGE sat alone in a smoking-carriage in a train bound for Southampton, and whither he might go from that starting-point he neither knew nor cared. One place was likely to be as blank and empty as another for many a year to come, he thought, and the world held nothing worth doing or seeing or thinking about. He was sore against himself, for it seemed only his own blunder which had driven him away. He was angry with Gilbert for having betrayed his confidence, and angry with himself for having put it in his power to do so. He confessed that if he had warned Gilbert the secret would have been safe in his hands; and he was very angry about his own stupidity.

Once or twice his heart told him, "It is better as it is;" but on the whole it was not

wonderful that this reflection had little power to soothe him. Reginald's declaration about their being both men of honour hit him hard. He had been honourable once, and he would have scorned in another the action which he himself had taken. He had planned to undermine his friend in the affections of his plighted wife. That was the plain English of the business, and black enough it looked when set forth simply so. But then came his excuses. Egotism, parent of dishonour and crime, put forth his plea. He loved, he suffered, he would be miserable for life. Not even yet had Egotism power to blind him altogether, and he saw that there were two sides to this, as to most other matters. Gerard loved, not so deeply as himself perhaps; for who could credit that?—but still he loved her, beyond doubt, because no man could help it. And Gerard, if robbed of her, would suffer too, though he would learn to live it down. Wonderful how easy it seemed, how likely it seemed—this learning to live it down—in the other man's case; how bitterly hopeless and dreary a prospect it presented in his own.

It is this faculty of seeing your own side big, and other people's little, which makes wars, breeds hatred, fills jails, and feeds the scaffold. The thief would no longer steal if he, ignorant, vicious, and ugly, could be brought to know that the philanthropist, his victim, lovely in men's sight, learned and pious, has claims upon the world which are equal to his own. But he does not dream of it, and does not indeed properly realize any other human creature's existence. Few of us are equal to that achievement. Other men are not alive to us, and therefore we injure or neglect them. They go about, assuredly, and conduct business, and marry wives, and rear children, and what not; but it is only you who are really alive in the middle of these simulacra, only you who love thus passionately, who suffer thus profoundly, who dream thus loftily.

It was not only the half-cured blind man in Palestine who saw men but as trees, walking.

Even in our bitterest hours we do things which are habitual to us. Val's cigar-case

was his one source of comfort at all vacuous times, and he went to it now. Mechanically he drew it from its place, mechanically chose a cigar, mechanically felt in his pockets for a vesta. First here, and then there, his fingers strayed, until his mind woke up and took part in the task. The little silver box was lost, or left behind, and it became suddenly a matter of the gravest importance that poor Val should smoke. And here was a twenty miles' run before him without a pause, and no chance of a whiff for an eternity of at least five and twenty minutes. Cruel Fate! His anger at this circumstance became at length comic to himself, and he took to chaffing himself drearily about it; but he looked half a score times out of the window for the station within that score of miles, and consulted his watch again and again. Time had never seemed to hang more heavily. The train reached the station at last, and Val's carriage stopped opposite a refreshment room. He leaped from his place to the platform.

"No time here, sir," an official on the platform warned him.

"All right," cried Val; and dashing into the refreshment-room, called for a box of vestas, and being most leisurely supplied by the superior person in charge of the place, rushed back again to find the train in motion.

"Here you are, sir!" cried the guard; and Val made a dash for the carriage door held open. The guard slammed it noisily behind him, and he had caught the train by a fraction of a second. But this was not his carriage, and indeed not a smoking compartment at all; and, to make matters worse, it was occupied by a lady in mourning, who sat veiled in one corner. Val within himself spoke evil of the guard, and greatly fumed and fretted. The night was cold, his rugs were in the other carriage, and their sudden loss rendered him doubly susceptible to the chilly air.

"Ugh!" said the ill-used creature, folding his overcoat about his legs and settling himself in his corner as comfortably as he could. Just then a sound struck his ear which made him worse content than ever. The lady in the corner was crying—sobbing outright as if her heart would break.

"More misery," said Val to himself, as though it injured him that his fellow-passenger should be unhappy. But he was naturally soft-hearted, and could not bear the sight of any other creature's trouble, least of all a woman's; and seeing how the whole slight figure heaved and shook with grief, he felt a swift touch of pity, and half involuntarily moved towards her.

"I beg your pardon, madam," said Val, baring his head, "but you are in trouble. Can I do anything for you?"

The poor thing only wept the more; but by-and-by, stealing a look at him from under her veil, saw a handsome face full of pity looking at her with tender and troubled interest.

"I have lost my father," said a girlish voice, so broken with sobs that it took half a minute to say it.—Val looked at the deep mourning in which she was dressed, and nodded sympathetically.—"No," she sobbed anew, reading his glance; "that is for my mother. I have lost my father at the railway station."

"Oh!" said he, "your father was travelling with you?"

"Yes," she said. "The train started, and left him behind."

"Oh," said Val; "he will come on by the next train. You mustn't be alarmed." She was quite a child, if he could judge from her voice and this abandonment of grief at so small a disaster. "Allow me to take care of you. How far are you going?"

"To Sou-Sou-Southampton," she said, and burst out crying anew, as though that made it worse than ever.

"Will anybody meet you there?" asked Val. "Have you friends in Southampton?"

"No," she answered.

"Never mind," said Val soothingly. "It will all come smooth by-and-by. Papa will come on by the next train; and you must stop at an hotel to-night, and meet the train in the morning." This programme seemed perfectly satisfactory to him; and his voice and face did something to comfort the girl, though what he said did little. She put up her veil after a time; and he saw that

she was somewhat older than he had fancied, and pretty, in spite of her flushed cheeks and tearful eyes.

"But," she said, looking piteously at Val, "I ought to have a ticket?"

"Oh yes," said Val, "you ought to have a ticket."—And she wept anew.—"Never mind," he said again. "Don't cry. You can pay at Southampton."

"But," she sobbed, in the simplicity of grief, "I haven't got any money!"

"Oh," said Val, "you haven't any money? Never mind. Don't cry.—Hillo! Here's another station.—Excuse me for a moment." Out he ran; and meeting his servant, who was on the look-out for him on the platform, ordered him to transfer his belongings. He handed one of his rugs to his companion, and bestowed the other on himself; and he comforted her with sherry and sandwiches until she began to cry quite contentedly, and after a long time ceased to cry at all, only the waves could not settle at once, and a sob rose now and again. It was evident that she was not exactly a lady, and evident

also that she was amazingly ignorant of the world. She was very frightened at the tunnels and bridges with their sudden deafening roar ; and Val's kindly comments on this alarm of hers elicited the fact that she had never travelled by rail before. When, before entering the terminal station, they were called upon for their tickets, she permitted Val to pay for her journey with no more remonstrance than a wistful look conveyed. She stood on the Southampton platform a few minutes later, and gazed about her in pure bewilderment and terror, clinging to Val's arm. "Here," said Val, looking back into the carriage, "you have forgotten your bag. Have you any luggage?"

"I have a box," she answered, accepting the black bag from Val's hand; and away she went by his side to the luggage van; and the box being extricated and recognized, her protector, rather enjoying the situation, led her to an hotel, ordered a room for her, and had a cup of tea sent up to her. He promised to meet her at breakfast in the morning, and then sat down in a

private room and smoked his fill, and was miserable.

The fact of having done something for a fellow-creature in trouble was not without its comfort for him; but he came back to his own griefs. Going away, an exile, leaving love behind! That millions had suffered so before was no salve to his sore heart. Running away from dishonour, that was something, but his will was not in it. He would have stayed behind had he taken his choice, and have drawn Love to his bosom though she brought dishonour with her. And that was a sad condition for a man to have come to. He had still enough honour left to see the disgrace to which he had been hurrying. "Thy grace being gained"—he was sitting with the sealed envelope, which held Constance's portrait, in his hand, and so had the line before him—"cures all disgrace in me." He knew that he would have to travel far before he could find a poorer sophistry than that. His conscience scorned it as a pun with no meaning; but Desire hugged it, and tried hard to believe in it. It was

significant of some power above himself that he laid down the envelope without opening it, as he longed to do.

Meanwhile, Hiram's little sweetheart slept soundly, and dreamed of Hiram, and of this wonderful, kind, good, new creature who had come into her life, and had been so generous. I do not believe that she had ever conversed with a gentleman until that evening, and she had been somewhat in awe of his splendours—the magnificent diamond on his white finger, his eyeglass, his moustaches, his little pointed sixteenth-century beard, his fine clothes; for Val was always a dressy man, though he never overdid the thing. And then he had made absolutely nothing of money, of ever so much money, and he kept a manservant, who dressed as well as Hiram, and looked almost as grand.

The hotel was such a building as she had never seen, except from the outside; and the furniture, and the waiters, and the chambermaid all rather overwhelmed her untravelled spirit. But she bestowed herself in the big bed with a combined sense of

adventure and luxury, and was fast asleep in a few minutes, and slept soundly until the chambermaid's knock aroused her. She looked neat and pretty in her plain black dress, and spotless cuffs and collars of white linen ; but she shrank inwardly to think that only ladies had a right to be in so magnificent a place as this, and reflected with sadness that ladies always went habited in silken gorgiosities, with gold chains and real lace and other marvels about them. She ventured out into the vast hotel corridor, and its waste silence frightened her so much that she retreated, and felt so utterly lonely and deserted that the tears of last night were almost in flow again, when, with a little dictatorial knock, the chambermaid entered and said that breakfast was ready. So Mary meekly followed the chambermaid, who led her once more into Val's presence.

Let it be recorded to his credit that Val had on this occasion surrendered one of his own specially beloved habits. He disliked crowds and tables-d'hôte, and being rich enough to secure privacy wherever he went,

had strengthened native tendency by habit, until a public eating-place was hateful to him. Breakfast, in especial, was a meal he liked to lounge over in privacy in dressing-gown and slippers. But thinking wisely that the girl would rather be spared a tête-à-tête, and that her present position—alone, with a male protector who was a stranger—demanded all possible delicacy of treatment, he ordered breakfast for two in the coffee-room; and thither she was shown. The breakfast service hit the untravelled maiden hard—the cut glass and the bright electro-plate, and the dish-covers. It is a fact that she had never until then set eyes upon a dish-cover. There were well-dressed people of both sexes in the room, and the room itself was large, lofty, and richly papered and corniced. She sat down in a tremor at all this, and Val had some little trouble in putting her completely at ease. Not that there was any open sign of awkwardness or ill-breeding about her—she would have passed for a lady with wonderfully little practice. After breakfast, Val took her to

meet the early train ; but no Garling came by it, for the best of reasons—or the worst. She told him with childlike naïveté all her little story, if you except the fact of Hiram ; and Val learned that she had lived all her life with the mother whom she had so lately lost, poor thing, and had worked these last three years as a milliner in the City. She was not at all clear about Garling, but supposed he had been away abroad—vaguely, and had only lately returned.

“ And you don’t know where he was coming to—in Southampton ? ” her companion asked.

“ No,” she answered falteringly.

“ And he doesn’t know where to send to you ? ”

“ No,” she said again. Val pondered as they went back from the station together. Was this mere child purposely thrown loose upon the world ? Wicked things than even that were done every day, and it was quite possible.

“ Where does your father live ? ” he asked her. She could not tell him. It was in a busy street, a very busy street, with a church

blocking up one end of it, as could be seen out of window, and before the church a curious arch with windows in it, as though a stone house had been built across the road, and a thoroughfare cut through it. Also between this arch and the church there was a great space cleared for some new building, and many men were at work there. Putting all things together, Val decided on this as Fleet Street; but she could not tell him the number of the house, or he would have made her send a telegram, on the chance of its finding her father. Was there anybody she could wire to? Hiram had left the old home, and was sleeping at a coffee-house until he could get new lodgings. He had promised that he would let her know his address so soon as he himself knew it; but she did not know where to send to him now; and Val's inquiries ending each and all in a "no thoroughfare," she became frightened, and had much ado not to cry again. They met the next train, and still no Garling came. Val began to think it settled that she had been purposely deserted.

"Do you know anybody in London who would take care of you?" he inquired.

"Oh yes," she said, brightening a little to think of Hiram. If she could only reach Hiram, she was safe.

"Had you not better send a message and go back?"

"I can't send a message," she faltered; "I don't know the address."

"Can you find the address?" he demanded.

"No," she answered; "but I can find him. He conducts an omnibus, and it goes up and down Cheapside."

"Oh!" said Val, with a curious glance at her. "He conducts an omnibus, does he? And it goes up and down Cheapside? Very well, then. And you are quite sure of being safe, if you find him?"

"Oh yes," she cried, with so much certainty that Val read the whole thing at once.

"Very well," he responded. "You had better go back to London. Do you know what to do with your luggage when you get to the station?"—She knew nothing.—He

explained to her how to leave her luggage at the cloak-room, and to take a ticket for it; and next he sought out the station-master, and told him where to send any inquirer who might come from London on the outlook for a daughter. To be brief, he saw her away by the next train, Garling still being absent from the scene; and having paid for her ticket, bestowed her in a carriage, committed her to the care of the guard, and slipped a five-pound note into her hand as the train moved off.

His manly kindness to this poor waif of fortune thawed his own numbed heart awhile, and then he went away and forgot her. She never forget him—it was scarcely possible that she should forget so notable a figure in her small life-history. She was faithful to Hiram; but a wonderful sort of worshipping admiration surrounded the kindly and generous stranger in her thoughts. Faithful to Hiram? Val no more disturbed her faith than if he had been a creature from another sphere, a conventional angel, or some other such wonderful wild-fowl. But she remem-

bered him, alike with gratitude and affection, and eagerly repaid him when the time came. And it was not her fault if the service she rendered him went towards his own undoing ; but his, who chose the service for her.

The weather was growing mild, and in the country places spring was stealing up apace, working all her yearly miracles by the way. The air grew balmy, and the sky clear.

“What does it matter to me where I go ?” said Val desperately.

The open sea would somehow be in tune with his mood, he fancied ; and so he shipped for the West Indies, after lounging for an uneasy day or two at Southampton ; but speeding towards the Islands of Spice over a sea and under a heaven which grew daily more lovely, he found no peace of heart. He wrote before starting one brief letter to Reginald, in which every line breathed recklessness and despair. He had locked Constance’s portrait in the largest of his trunks, and had it buried in the ship’s hold—without much avail, since it haunted him through the

long empty hours of a smooth and uneventful passage.

Perhaps this voyage was as mistaken a remedy as he could anyhow have indulged in. He had nothing to do except to smoke and moon about the decks and think of Constance and his own unhappiness. His fellow-passengers were few and disagreeable. They comprised a Jewish lady who had been handsome, and remembered what had been so clearly that she had no perception for the present, but dressed and ogled eagerly for Val's delight; a beady-eyed boy of twelve, her son, who had been at school in England, and was, from a combination of causes, downright intolerable; a ponderous British person, who oiled his hair, wore crumpled linen, and much flash jewellery, and spread dirty hands on the dinner-table to have his rings admired; and a couple of British youths fresh from school, who were going out to a sugar estate in Jamaica. These young gentlemen being newly liberated from the restraints of civilization, drank brandy-and-water all day long, and smoked, by way of announcing the com-

plete attainment of the rights of man, the vilest Cavendish to be got for love or money.

The condition of Val's mind was such that these people one and all became hateful to him. They were not nice people, and in any circumstances he would have chosen their room rather than their company; but now they seemed to inspire him with a disgust of all his species. For the first time in his life he was morose for a week together; and being forced inward, he fed upon his own heart, and found it innutritive and spiritually unpalatable.

He was so far gone, that he never once brought himself steadily to contemplate this as a final parting from Constance, and when that view of the journey insisted on being faced, he put it away from him savagely. He was going away—that was enough, surely. He was already absent and in pain; why torture himself needlessly? Slowly but surely his mind began to slide towards the contemplation of an immediate return. It was clear enough that if he ventured upon such a course, it must be pursued secretly,

and without Reginald's knowledge; and thus he found himself pledged to crooked courses at every succeeding stage. This journey began to assume the aspect of a penance voluntarily undertaken, and turning out to be unavailing.

Val found it anything but easy or pleasant to behave dishonourably; he was so unfortunately susceptible to popular opinion, so anxious to stand well with all men, and to have the good opinion even of strangers. This feeling operated now so decidedly, that even when he had determined to return, he would not go back by the ship in which he had made the outward voyage, lest the captain and the crew should think him an uncertain, vacillating fellow, who did not know his mind, and was moving vacuously for no purpose about the world. He even made a pretence of business to his servant, whilst awaiting the departure of the next homeward-bound vessel, to conciliate his good opinion.

Excuses were not lacking for him, as he steamed homeward. He had gone away, and

found it impossible to remain. Perhaps, after all, circumstances might hold him apart from Constance. Perhaps, even—so monstrous a shape could self-delusion take—he might see more of her, and become disillusionized. Val Strange was not a fool by nature, and yet he accepted even this preposterous pretence of an excuse, and persuaded himself that it was probable.

He reached England, and journeyed back to London. But town was growing full, and he was afraid of observation, and lay close, avoiding his clubs, and meeting few of his old companions. He contrived to learn that Constance had returned with her father and brother to the Grange, and, moved by some desperate impulse, ran down to Ryde, where his yacht was lying, and sailed for Welbeck Head, in the mad hope that somehow he might get a glimpse of her. Before he sighted the Head, he had been absent from Constance six weeks, and in that time great events had taken place.

CHAPTER XVII.

HAD Garling's nerves been of steel instead of the ordinary human fibre, a shade tougher than common, he must needs have shaken a little when that grip fell upon his arm, and the voice of his employer sounded in his ear. His head turned slowly, and he looked across his shoulder, meeting Lumby eye to eye. There was a wicked light in the eyes of both men. The merchant looked like a duellist ready to give account of a hated foe; the cashier's glance was like a snake's. The train rumbled away; and for a half-minute after it had gone, the two stood on the deserted platform, looking at each other in the light of a lamp which stood close by, casting its rays between them. In the tension of his nerves, Lumby gripped harder and harder. In the tension of his nerves, Garling was

unconscious of the grasp, after the first shock it gave him. Cool and ready as he was by nature, and swiftly as his mind recovered itself, that wicked frozen glance lasted long enough to betray him a hundred times over.

"May I ask," he said in a voice that grated curiously, and had to be forced to make it audible, "the meaning of this rather remarkable greeting?"

The merchant kept his eyes upon him, and for sole answer gripped by the other arm and shook him, slightly, but strongly. The position made it somewhat difficult for Garling to look round; for his employer, having in the first instance approached him from the rear, had laid his right hand on Garling's right arm, and now, having grasped the other with his left, he stood almost behind his captive. The captive made no attempt to move, but kept that wicked backward-glancing eye upon the other's face. "Pray, explain this curious action!" he said in the same grating tones.

"You villain!" cried the other, shaking him anew — "you scoundrel!" His voice

also had undergone a change, and sounded harsh and low.

When a man is gripped from behind by both arms and violently shaken to and fro by one whose strength is much greater than his own, there is some chance of his finding it difficult to maintain a seeming of dignity. Garling found it so. His knees and his back became limp, and the hands which shook him suddenly releasing him, he staggered forward; and his hat fell off. The merchant raised his foot and kicked it off the platform; and then, wild with the rage he had only now begun to let loose, he turned on Garling as though bent on sending him after it. But the cashier evaded him, and skipped behind a pillar. At this juncture, a porter appeared, and discerning no more than a forcible disagreement between two elderly gentlemen, lifted up his voice in remonstrance.

"Come, gentlemen, you mustn't kerry on them games here!" said the porter.

The interruption recalled the merchant to himself. "Come with me," he said quietly to Garling. "I suppose you had rather not

be handcuffed, and I have no wish to make a scene."

At this the porter stared from one to the other; and Garling, with resumed dignity, turned upon him calmly.

"You will find a hat on the rails," he said. "Pick it up for me."—The man obeyed this order; and Garling bestowed a sixpence upon him in return. "You will regret this violence," he said, turning with cold hauteur towards his employer. This demonstration of dignity was chiefly intended for the benefit of the porter; for even Garling was not devoid of that amiable weakness which makes men desire that others should think well of them.

Lumby, thrusting an arm through his, led him from the platform without another word. It would have been useless for Garling to resist, and he, knowing that, was too wise to try. Lumby held to him so tightly, that when they came to enter the hansom, they bundled in together awkwardly, and the cashier found divers corners of himself contused. The cabman having received his instructions, drove in the direction of the

offices, and the merchant gripped his captive all the way.

In Garling's mind there was such blank despair and rage as only a foiled scoundrel is permitted to experience. To have come so near, after waiting so long, and at last, on the very verge of victory, to be thus ignominiously taken, was maddening. Frenzies of rage and disappointment shook his heart, and if he had had a weapon in his hand, there were moments in that brief ride in which he would have willingly struck his captor dead. But he had still a stake to play for, though all his base gains of the past nine years were lost, and that stake was dear to him, for it was nothing less than liberty. There was such a strain of caution in the man, that he had counted on this failure all along, and had planned as carefully to meet it as if it had been certain. Not that it was any the less exasperating, now it came, for this prevision. His murderous glance, as he cast it now and again sideways on the fixed and silent face beside him, was warrant enough for that.

of my plans?" But he answered never a word.

"Speak!" said the merchant, panting at him, in an agitation terrible to look at. "Of how much have you robbed the firm?" His face was alternately gray and purple. His features jerked and quivered, his hands shook, and a visible tremor possessed his whole body. —Garling read his own advantage in all these signs, and still said not a word. —"Speak! you—you scoundrel!" cried Lumby, falling anew upon him, and seizing him by the waistcoat and the bosom of his shirt. "Of how much have you robbed us?"

"Of not one halfpenny!" said Garling stonily. The words and manner so amazed the merchant that he dropped his hands. The cashier stepped back quietly, so as to place the table between them, keeping his eyes on Lumby as he moved, and, laying one hand on the table, leaned slightly forward, whilst with the other he arranged his disordered dress. In this attitude he spoke again: "Of not one halfpenny, or of everything—according as you use me."

If any third person could have looked upon the scene at this minute, he might well have been excused had he mistaken the several parts they played. The just employer sank into a seat with his hands drooping by his sides and a face of extreme pallor. The fraudulent cashier, pale enough in all conscience, but self-possessed and firm, looked down upon him across the table, still fumbling with his hand at his bosom. Coupled with the calm in which he stood and the cruel look upon his face, the action, simple as it was, seemed deadly. It was as if he searched slowly and calmly for a weapon, and had the will to use it. Lumby made a great effort, and resumed something like composure.

"I might have guessed beforehand," he said slowly, in a voice unlike his own, "that if you chose a criminal course you would go boldly and warily. I know now that you have chosen such a course, and I tell you that the safest plan for you is to make a clean breast of it and confess everything. Of how much have you robbed us?"

"Either of nothing or of everything,"

responded Garling. "It is in your power to bring down utter ruin, or to recover all. Your treatment of me will determine that."

"You mean that the firm is in your power?"

"Precisely," said Garling.

"I do not know how that can be," said Lumby; "but it is a question easily tested." He struck his hand heavily upon the bell which lay upon the table.

"I recommend you to pause," said the cashier coldly. "If you fulfil your present purpose, you are ruined."

"I will see," returned the merchant.

"You will see," said Garling calmly. "You propose to arrest me? Good. You may save yourself the trouble of opening your doors to-morrow. If I am arrested, the firm is bankrupt—hopelessly insolvent."

"We shall see," said Lumby. The cashier's voice and face, however, made such impression upon him, that, when the heavy footsteps of the night-watchman sounded in the corridor, he arose and waited at the closed door for his knock.

The knock came, and Lumby, opening the door, said only, "Wait at the end of the corridor. I may want you in a moment." He kept his eyes on Garling; and if in that stony and impassive countenance of his he had read a touch of fear or of boasting, either would have decided him. But he saw neither one nor the other.

Garling had this advantage: he was enacting in earnest a scene which he had countless times rehearsed in fancy—and to play it well or ill was almost life or death to him.

The door was closed and locked again, and the heavy footsteps retreated to the end of the corridor. Lumby, though liable to sudden gusts of passionate anger, and less under control than the other, was growing strung to something like the enemy's pitch. The intensity of mood had been beyond words already; but the intensity of manner was now increased tenfold by the near neighbourhood of the man, which reduced speech almost to a whisper. The merchant felt he had nothing to lose by a pause—he could afford to wait long enough to get light to go by.

"Are you prepared," he asked, "to make a full confession and restitution? Is that your meaning?"

"I may be induced to mean something like that," the cashier answered.

"You may be induced?"

"I may be induced." The villain's composure was a study.

"To mean something like that?"—with bitter irony.

"Something nearly approaching to it; yes"—with perfect business-like precision and quiet.

"Will you be so good as to tell me how we are in your power?"

"I will explain," said Garling, clearing his throat slightly.

"Thank you," returned Lumby—"if you will be so good." Their eyes met again, and Garling's fell. His face became a little paler in its gray; but he cleared his throat again and went on. His hand was still fumbling at his breast automatically, though he had forgotten the purpose which first sent it there.

"I proceeded in this matter," he said harshly and drily, "with much caution and foresight. I have never been a spendthrift, and in fact I have always lived well within my income. As a result of that, I have been enabled to employ such sums as I have transferred to my own service to considerable advantage, and ultimately to pass them, through varying channels, to swell the store I had begun to accumulate abroad."—The merchant listened with a face as gray as Garling's own.—"The accumulations becoming in course of years, say three or four years, considerable, I was enabled to keep up a constant circulation of capital with such irregular additions and diminutions in the flow as would occur naturally in the course of an extensive business. At the end of perhaps five years, the impossibility of further operations of that simple order clearly declared itself. But by throwing up my plans at that time, I should have killed the goose which laid the eggs without having filled my basket. You will understand that at this time—now four years ago—everything that could be drawn

from the firm in its then condition had been drawn, and that the firm lived by the continued circulation of that foreign hoard. I had laboured, as you know, to increase the scope of the house's operations, and in that direction I still laboured with some not inconsiderable measure of success."

Half a dozen times in the course of this statement the cashier raised his eyes, and, meeting his employer's glance, looked down again.

"It would have been possible, since the original capital of the house was not only intact but multiplied, to have proceeded upon this plan indefinitely. But I found myself already past middle age, and—delays are dangerous. The channel in which the funds flowed—if I make myself clear—was circular. It was competent for me to arrest them at any point of the circle. That was a work of much delicacy, and demanded care and time. You will excuse me for offering you at this point only a general statement, and for avoiding detail which might obscure a broad view of the position. In brief, the

various channels have all been directed into one reservoir, and have there discharged themselves. There is a spot or two in the London pipes, but not a drop elsewhere. And the disadvantage of the house, and my advantage is, that the reservoir is available to me only."

Mr. Lumby sat still and looked at Garling. He had read of frauds, heard of them in plenty, had even assisted at the investigation of one or two; but he had never met with anything like the massive insolence of this defrauder.

"You had completed your work," he said at length, "and you were going to-night"—Garling slightly inclined his head, and moistened his dry lips a little with the tip of his tongue—"leaving the firm insolvent?"

"Leaving the firm insolvent!" Garling answered like a dusky echo.

"And being caught," said Lumby, with a transient flush of triumph, "you are ready to disgorge?"

"Partly," answered Garling, "and upon conditions."

"I will accept no partial restoration," said the merchant, by this time restored to full possession of himself, "and I will make no conditions with you."

"That is for you to decide," responded Garling, "not for me. But, except upon my own conditions, my lips are sealed. You have no clue—forgive me if I lay the matter before you plainly—you have no clue at present to the whereabouts of the money, and if you should discover it, you cannot handle it."

"I can send you to penal servitude, probably for life," returned the merchant; "and having done that, I can accept my fate equably."

"You are willing to buy revenge at too dear a rate," said Garling; "and so far you have nothing to punish but the intention of a wrong. I heard it whispered this afternoon that you had intended to introduce Mr. Gerard into the firm. If his wishes were consulted, now?"

"Garling," said the head of the firm with measured sarcasm, "it is to be regretted that

you have made so poor a use of your talents. I had always a high opinion of your powers, and until now I never saw the flaw in them, or you. In me, you are utterly mistaken. You measure me by yourself, and in doing that you really offer me too much injustice. I will have no traffic with you until I have a full and complete surrender. I will make no promise, or hint at any promise, until you throw yourself entirely on my mercy ; for I vow," he cried, with a sudden passion of righteous anger, "that I would rather see my son break stones by the wayside, than make him a Croesus by stooping to barter with your villainy ! Decide, then, and decide quickly ! You may beggar me and mine ; but, please God, you shall not smear our honest hands by passing any gift to them through yours."

Before this burst of wrath, Garling bowed his head gravely and quietly, and spread both hands abroad a little, as if deprecating an exaggerated view of things. Seeing this, the merchant again brought his hand down heavily upon the bell ; and the watchman,

who had heard his master's voice raised high in anger, came with alacrity to answer it.

"Decide!" said Lumby again, in a high voice, which rang like a knell in Garling's ears. But the cashier had played his game too long to be willing to relinquish all; and what daring could do he would do. With him the position was like that of a player in the American game of "Brag," and he had a shrewd suspicion that Lumby was in something of the same mood with himself. So, when the merchant cried "Decide!" he waved his hands again with a repetition of the deprecatory gesture, and, with a little downward motion of the head, he answered, "I have decided."

The passionless gray of his face fell a tone lower, and Lumby saw it. Everything depended—for Garling's surmise respecting him was true—or seemed to depend, on his own promptitude and fearlessness of action. He called "Come in!" in answer to the watchman's knock, and threw the door wide open.

"You abide by your decision?" he asked briefly and sternly.

"I abide by it," was Garling's answer. "Yes." His cue was to conceal emotion, and he followed it well; but he could not hide the moisture on his forehead nor the twitching of his ashen lips nor the tremor of his hand.

"I have your last word?" said Lumby. "Remember! The next step is beyond recall."

"So be it," returned Garling.

Since the opening of the door, their colloquy had been carried on in a low murmur, apart from the watchman, who, having advanced no farther than the mat in the doorway, stood there respectfully, twirling his cap in both hands. Lumby, with one look which fell full in Garling's eyes, turned to the man.

He had but addressed him by name, when the cashier's voice, chill and measured, rose behind him, saying, "Horton! You may go outside for a moment, and close the door."

The man, with a look at his employer, obeyed.

"I throw up my hand," said Garling. It

was well for him that he read faces quickly and truly, and that he could estimate aright the resolution expressed in the gesture with which the merchant had turned away from him. "I only ask one pledge."

"I will give you no pledge at all," returned the merchant.

"Permit me," said Garling drily, pushing a letter-clip along the table with one hand and trifling with the spring. "In this matter, I would venture to urge that you have scarcely any option. It is of more importance to recover your money than to have me transported. Until I receive your pledge that I go free, I will not speak a word."

His employer looked at him with a doubtful mastery of aspect.

"Observe. To imprison me is to call down certain ruin. Give me the pledge I ask for, and you have power enough to shake your last halfpenny from me. You have brains enough to see that!" he added coarsely.

Lumby regarded him steadfastly.

"You are a cunning villain, Garling, and you have laid your plans well. I suppose I

must wrong society by turning you loose upon the world. Have you—forgive my curiosity—any remorse for having rewarded an old friend's kindness in this way? Why, you cur, have you no memory of the favours heaped upon you? Haven't you a blush? The blood is ashamed of that fox face of yours, and runs away from it. You scoundrel!"

This speech was dictated by many impulses. There was satire in it, and sorrow in it. There were contempt and anger. The final expletive was one of almost unmixed wonder. As for Garling, there was no denying that he bore the situation well. He had failed. The long-drawn and elaborate plot, on which his splendid financial genius had for nine years centred itself, had crumbled to dust in an hour, every strand and thread of it dissolved, as though it had been woven of sand.

He made no pretence of not caring, and gave no sign of being overwhelmed. He did not rage, and he did not fall into flippancy. He had missed the issue of his life, and this failure told him so. He had been phenomenal

among swindlers, and had failed as vulgarly, and been caught as ignominiously as any City 'prentice who steals from the shop-till and is taken by the ear in the act. Where, under these circumstances, was the good of having been phenomenal! And here was old age coming—he felt old now—he had been young twelve hours ago, comparatively—and he was dishonoured and thrown loose upon the world. Well, he would not grumble. He had weighed the stakes before he played for them, and he had staked and—lost. All that was left now was to come out of the ruin with as little damage as possible, or at least with as little sign of damage. So he bore his employer's reproaches with a contempt which, under the circumstances, was hardly curious.

“Let us be business-like,” he urged.

The Himalayan impudence of this reproach struck Lumby dumb, and even when he had recovered it had the effect of restraining any further expression of his wrath. Speech was plainly of no effect in this case.

“If,” pursued Garling, “you will draw up

a statement of your own intention with regard to me, I will put into your hands my private ledgers, which will show you everything at a glance."

"Are you so ignorant of the criminal code of England," asked Lumby, "as to suppose that any assurance of mine given now can hinder me from prosecuting you?"

"I am not so ignorant of you," returned Garling, "as not to know that you will not expose yourself as having gone back from your written word."

"You have my word," said the merchant.

"I can't show your word in court, if you deceive me," said Garling.

"I suppose," asked Lumby, "that you have no belief in any man's honour?"

"I never had," responded the defrauder grimly.

And there, probably enough, was the original key to his ruin.

Lumby yielded, and wrote out the pledge he asked for, setting forth that it was given only on condition of complete restitution. Garling thereafter sat down at the table and

prepared an abstract report of his villainy. It took an hour or two's hard writing; and Lumby read it sheet by sheet as the late cashier laid it methodically by. It was luminous, and the very soul of brevity, considering its mass of unavoidable detail. Garling's financial genius permitted him to append to this report a sort of swindler's balance sheet, in which the precise position of affairs was shown, and wherein, by a marvellous effort of memory, dates and figures were set down, as it afterwards turned out, with scrupulous exactness.

"My private ledgers," said Garling, "will afford more extended information. The final appeal must be made here." He pointed to the vast volumes ranged along one side of the room. "But that," he added, "will be a work of time."

The balance sheet at the end of Garling's abstract had rather an air of hocus-pocus to the merchant. It seemed scarcely credible, for one thing, that memory should be so minutely retentive; and he insisted, without loss of time, on comparing it with the de-

frauder's private entries. To this end, between two and three o'clock in the morning, he escorted the cashier home. Before he started, however, he locked the confession in his own drawer.

"It might seem worth while to murder me for that, if you had a chance to do it in your own place, quietly—eh, Garling?"

"No," responded Garling, with a voice of tranquillity. They walked to what had been Garling's home together, and they worked till daylight. The merchant made him sit down at the table, whilst he stood behind him, or occasionally, for a change of posture, knelt upon a chair.

"It is now eight o'clock," said Lumby, when the balance-sheet was verified. "You will report yourself at the office to me at ten. If you are five minutes late, I shall give information to the police."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HAD Gerard known that Constance was going to London, he might perhaps have been more ready to accompany his father thither. But, as a matter of fact, the visit was unpremeditated. The maiden aunt in Chesterfield Street, Mayfair, had money, and was known to be kindly disposed to Constance. When, therefore, the old lady, learning from her brother that he was about to visit London, expressed a strong hope that he would bring Constance with him, Mr. Jolly accepted the desire as a command. He was not unaware of the importance of money; and though Constance seemed already fairly provided for, it would still be unwise not to conciliate the maiden aunt, who was naturally anxious to learn at first hand the details of her niece's engagement. And if Lucretia—that was the

name of the maiden aunt—should express any intentions with respect to her testamentary dispositions, Mr. Jolly was quite persuaded that at such a juncture nothing could be more natural.

It was not difficult to persuade Constance; for, to tell the truth, she was beginning to find the social atmosphere of the Grange a little stifling. Her father's dull pomposities and shallow aphorisms were insufferably tedious. There are a good many dull and pompous fathers in the world, whose daughters, aided by Love, revere and admire them. Constance was unhappily without Love's aid, and her father wearied her exactly as any other prosy person would have done.

In his inmost soul, Mr. Jolly had an idea that his style was Disraelian. He was Conservative in politics, and modelled himself naturally on the lines of his party chief. But it is not everybody who can fight in Saul's armour, and the Disraelian style, handled by Mr. Jolly, was a cruel thing to suffer under. Reginald found it endurable, because it awakened his own sense of humour. He saw

the fun of it; but Constance, who, like many charming women, had but a limited perception of fun, saw and felt only its dreariness. The house itself was somewhat dull after that fever of festivity into which Mr. Jolly had for a time plunged it, and she was willing to welcome any reasonable pretence which called her away from it.

These were the reasons which she admitted to herself; but there was another which had more weight than both of them, although she was reluctant to own it—she was weary of Gerard.

Admiration is a pleasant thing to endure, but the signs of it may be so presented as to grow tedious. Gerard had no small-talk, and his icy divinity froze him. He was not happy in her presence; but his dreams of her presence made him happy. There was not the faintest doubt in his mind that when once they were married they would live a life of pattern felicity. The old truth which it was Pope's good fortune to crystallize for English-speaking people, operated here as elsewhere: "Man never is, but always to be blest." The

future was roseate ; the present, misty. Always that wonderful glamour, which perhaps alone makes life worth living, lay about to-morrow, but never about to-day.

Whether it were an old device or a new one, I cannot say, but I remember that in the year 1865 I witnessed an acted morality or mystery, the memory of which has remained with me. The scene was the cavalry barracks of Cahir, in County Tipperary—the occasion, the annual regimental sports of the Fourth Royal Irish Dragoon Guards. When the sword-exercise and foil-play and boxing, the running, walking, leaping, and vaulting matches were over—when the men had raced behind wheelbarrows and jumped in sacks, and the tug-of-war was lost and won, there came, the festival to crown, a donkey-race. In an Irish barracks, an Irish regiment could do little else than adopt the Irish manner ; so each rider rode somebody else's donkey, and the last donkey to pass the post won. Private Paddy Byrne, a regimental unit attached to the F Troop—this is not fiction, but history ; and when, oh when, did it cross Paddy's

mind that an old comrade would put him in a novel?—with a wonderful laughable Irish grin on the Hibernian face of him, perched himself an inch or two for'ard of his donkey's tail, and laid between the steed's ears a switch, on the end whereof swung two inviting carrots and a clean white turnip. Away went the donkey in pursuit of these sweet cates, never more than a stride's length from his watering teeth, yet never attainable. Every stride deceived him; but Hope sprang eternal in the asinine bosom, and he still pursued. I was young and thoughtless in those days, and at this acted mystery I laughed unthinkingly. But in the years which have gone since then, I know now that not a day has passed in which I have not with equal wisdom raced after something no more worth having and no more attainable, and Paddy Byrne's donkey has with me risen to the dignity of a moral mythus, preaching eternal truths. And he typifies, indeed, not me alone, but a whole hungry foolish world, tearing headlong in pursuit of that sweet and dear to-morrow, which it never reaches.

With the rest of the world, let him typify Gerard. "If I laugh," wrote the saddest satirist that ever put pen to paper, "'tis that I may not weep." One may as well put things cheerfully as sorrowfully. You may suck marrow of mirth, and grow as wise as by sipping the salt of tears—if you are a born angel, and a saint by nature.

Mr. Jolly apprised Constance, in the afternoon, of her aunt's desire; and it was decided that they should all three go to town together on the following day. Gerard came in the evening as usual; but she allowed him to ride away without telling him of the arrangement made. An hour before starting she sent him a brief note, saying that her aunt desired to see her, and that she was going to London, but, of design aforethought, forgot to give her lover her town address. She remedied this omission a day or two later, when she had secured a little quiet, and had discovered that it is better to be bored by admiration than not to be admired at all. To her amazement, Gerard did not fly to her when she lifted her finger. A day or two passed, and she did

not hear from him. Matters grew a little wonderful, and even a little alarming.

We have seen already that Val Strange made a call upon her. Familiar as Val contrived to seem in Reginald's eyes, this was his first visit; but he and Miss Lucretia were known to each other beforehand, and Val was a reminder to the old lady of her one romance. These renewals of youth are singular. Val's father was the only one among many admirers for whom Miss Lucretia in her youth had cared; but with that perversity which is a part of love, they had quarrelled over some trifle or other no bigger than a mote in a sunbeam, and had so parted—the man to forget as men forget, the woman to remember as women remember. Of this the young fellow knew nothing. Had he known, he might have sought the sympathy and intervention of the old lady, and have besought her to implore Constance to break off a loveless engagement. It is hard to say whether such a course could or could not have been justified, though there is little doubt that Val would have been able to justify

it to himself. But he was ignorant of the tie between himself and the old maid, and knew nothing of the affection with which she regarded him. Had he known, the course of this story might have been altered ; but, then, there is nothing so slight in life that it might not alter the course of any human tragedy or comedy. And now Val was gone from Constance's little circle, and still no Gerard came. The absence of one, and the silence of the other, became remarkable, before Reginald came to explain one of the phenomena, and a shock, which was in its way a sort of social earthquake, came to explain the second.

Reginald lounged in a day or two after Val's departure, and found his sister alone. Some conversational preliminaries being gone through, which had but little interest for either of them, Reginald said casually, "I say, Con., did Strange tell you he was going to the West Indies ?"

"No," said Constance, bending closer over her embroidery. "When is he going?" She tried to make the question sound com-

monplace and disinterested, but read failure in her own tones.

"Oh," said Reginald, ensconcing himself for more safety behind his eyeglass, and watching her keenly, "he's gone. Started yesterday."

Constance, with a great effort, retained composure.

"Why did he go?" she asked. "Had he business there—property there?"

"Oh," said the wary youth, "you never know where to have Strange. You'd think he was dead-set on something or other, and meant to spend his life at it, and in half an hour he's dead-set on something else. You never know what he'll do next."

Woman are much better actresses than men are actors, and when Constance spoke, her nonchalance might have puzzled a less careful observer. She held her embroidery a little from her in both hands, turned her beautiful head this way and that, regarding it; and then, slowly raising her violet eyes, she dropped one negligent word: "Indeed?" But she had not calculated that Reginald

suspected, and was watching, and so she overdid it by a trifle, and seemed to his keen vision supernaturally indifferent.

"Yes," murmured the watcher, fixing his eyeglass with a facial contortion which laid the ghost of expression still lingering, "he's an awfully odd fish is Strange. You really never know where to have him."

He was modest enough to distrust his own powers, and he stopped short there, having done enough, as he conceived, for one day. His finesse was well meant, and for the moment it was satisfactory.

"So," said Constance to herself, "he has run away to avoid me." Her heart sank at this desertion. She had forbidden Strange ever to speak again on the topic he had once broached to her; but she had not forbidden him her presence, and indeed had not the strength of heart so to deny him or herself. She pitied him—it was sweet to pity him. Before she had heard his confession she had gone the usual maiden path to love, and had not known to what goal it led her. She found his society pleasant, more pleasant

than that of any man she had ever encountered—so much, she was aware of. She knew that her society was pleasing to him; but for so beautiful a woman she was amazingly devoid of vanity, and no thought of his being in love with her crossed her mind. For that matter, her engagement to Gerard seemed to hem her about with a sort of Society sacredness—men did not fall in love with young ladies who were engaged to be married. And when at last Strange's wild declaration was made, her own heart answered it with a voice which there was no chance of mistaking. Here at last was the man who held the key to her heart, out of all the scores who had come a-wooing, and he came too late.

It might have seemed easy enough to do the only thing which, under the circumstances, was wise and honourable—to send Gerard his dismissal, and to tell him that a union between them could lead only to unhappiness. But the wise and right thing to do is not always that which presents itself most attractively, and she had no one to advise and

help her. That Gerard would have freed her, had she appealed to him, though he broke his heart in doing it, went of course without saying. But then there was the natural disinclination to so pronounced an action, the natural fear of his silent reproach, the natural dread of the county talk. It would be bitter to be called a jilt; and there was no reason or shadow of a reason, except the true one, which she could assign against her engagement to Gerard.

So, like wiser people, she decided to let things take their course for a time, with a vague hope that something might come to pass which would unravel the tangled skein and lay it out straight and smooth once more. And her reluctance to pain Gerard had more ground than a natural tenderness of disposition, which is happily common to most women. She respected him, and in her secret heart was sensitively afraid of his ill opinion. Notwithstanding the general chilliness of their courtship, they might have made a very happy married pair, but for the advent of Val Strange. It is only in

novels that husband and wife are kept apart by those thread-like filaments of feeling of which a certain school of feminine romancists are so prodigal. The plain English of that matter is, that unless the man is absolutely distasteful, or the woman's mind is pre-occupied, marriage is the shortest way to love, and the surest.

To Constance's mind, Val's precipitate flight spoke only of a longing and a despair which had grown unendurable. She saw him fighting for honour's sake, flying all he held dear, and going away into a void world which had no chance of solace for him. He had fled for honour's sake; and for that, though it wounded her sorely, she half deified him.

Once before, as she knew, he had struggled to escape her charm, and had failed. She had trembled to think of that; yet where on earth is the woman who would not have been pleased by such a compliment?

When she could escape from Reginald's presence, she fled to her own room, and cried to think of Val and his love and courage and

forlornness. He proved his love by running away from her, and, with a rare magnanimity, trusted to her to understand and forgive; nay, perhaps with a magnanimity rarer still, trusted to offend her by the brusquerie of his departure, and so turn her heart towards Gerard once again. We who are behind the scenes, and know the course of circumstances which dictated Val's flight, can scarcely share her exalted notions of his delicacy, his honour, and his courage. But howsoever mistaken she might be, her thoughts of him were valuable to herself.

"He helps me back to the path of honour," she said, even while she wept at his departure. "I am pledged to Gerard, and I must be true to my word. I must try to love Gerard; that is my only real safeguard."

Poor girl! When did ever love grow in answer to commandment? Yet there was this help—that Val had put a distance of real severance between them, and obviously meant to return no more until he could return in safety. She was proud, and she

was pure-minded, and purely bred, and habits of thought and feeling are strong things, even when assaulted by the passions. She would not scorn herself so far as to fancy that if once she were safely married to Gerard any man could move her to one unfaithful or regretful thought. And now she began to long for that union to which she had looked forward hitherto either with coldness or with shrinking.

No word from Gerard. She besieged herself with questions as to the meaning of his silence, and could find no answer. Her lovely cheek paled with the inward conflict; and Miss Lucretia, who knew of nothing but happiness in her fortunate niece's lot, must needs send for a doctor, who prescribed a tonic. Constance submitted, but left his medicine untasted; and Miss Lucretia remonstrated, and had terrible visions of a premature grave for her beautiful niece.

"My dear Constance," the old lady said at length, being fairly frightened by the girl's languor and want of appetite, and the pallor which had taken the place of her late lovely

bloom, "I must insist—I really must insist upon your taking the mixture."

She poured out a dose, and advanced with it, bearing the wineglass in one hand, and in the other, daintily held between finger and thumb, a lump of sugar. Constance, too languid to resist, accepted the medicine, but refused the sugar. She had almost lost all sense of taste in her two or three days of illness, and the nauseous bitter scarcely existed for her. Then, being in a mood so tender and sore that all the fibres of heart and mind seemed raw, she began to cry a little at her aunt's caresses.

"My dear," said the old lady, with sudden decision, "there is something on your mind. You are fretting about something."

Constance peevishly repudiated this idea. Her temper, naturally even and coldly sweet, had within the last day or two grown sickly and uncertain.

"My dear," repeated the old lady, with gentle but firm insistence. "there is something on your mind. Did you expect him to follow you to town?"

"I don't know," said Constance. "I am not fretting. I am not quite well. That is all."

"No, my dear," said Miss Lucretia, with chirpy firmness; "that is not all." Miss Lucretia was one of those dear old ladies who are slow to receive ideas, but who, having by any process absorbed them, hold on to them with marvellous firmness. "You are fretting."

"You are very unkind," said Constance, who was made more miserable by the fact that she could not honourably confide in anybody, and so allowed her misery to recoil in anger. But she was so palpably unhappy, that Miss Lucretia would not be angry in turn. She only put her withered arms about the beautiful neck, and, in spite of a feeble resistance, drew her niece's head to her bosom.

"I am ungrateful and wicked, dear aunt," sobbed the girl, easily melted by this voiceless caressing patience. "You are not unkind, are you, dear?" And she looked up with violet eyes full of penitence.

"Why should I be unkind to anybody who is in trouble?" asked Miss Lucretia, still

clinging to her point, and seizing the chance of putting it forward again. "I have suffered, and I can sympathize with suffering. Tell me what is the matter."

Miss Lucretia was very sentimental, as tender-hearted old maiden ladies mostly are, and she had a wonderful scent for a love-trouble.

Now, "Ask me no questions and I tell no lies" is not a proverb of the lofty sort, but it yet holds a word of warning for those who care for wisdom. If you will insist on having the confidence of one who is unwilling to impart it, you ought not in charity to be too amazed if a half-confidence is imposed upon you, or even if you are set upon a wrong scent altogether.

"He might have written," murmured Beauty in distress, suddenly grown double-faced. Miss Lucretia applied this stricture to the conduct of Gerard solely, though, as a matter of fact, in Constance's mind it slid between him and Strange, and was aimed at once at both, and neither.

"Is that all?" said Aunt Lucretia. "You

little goose!" She kissed her fair burden patron-like, almost protectingly. The epithet "little" addressed by Miss Lucretia to Constance was droll. Constance, even whilst labouring under a sense of her own duplicity, smiled furtively. "My dear," said the old lady, "young gentlemen have so many things to think of. And did you not tell me that his father had announced his desire to make arrangements for your future? I have been making inquiries, my dear, and Mr. Chichester, who knows a great many City people, assured me that the affairs of Lumby and Lumby are Colossal. That was his word, my dear, not mine. Colossal. Now, if the affairs of a house are justly to be described as Colossal—and I can repose the most implicit confidence in Mr. Chichester, who would not exaggerate for the world—it will necessarily be a matter of time to make the arrangement which Mr. Lumby suggests; and Gerard is probably quite absorbed in business, and is waiting until he can lay everything before you."

This explanation was so satisfactory to Miss

Lucretia, that she dwelt upon it at considerable length, the fact that Lumby and Lumby's affairs were Colossal appearing to afford her the warmest gratification. Constance was too glad to be left alone to interrupt her, and she followed the tangled threads of her own thought, whilst the old lady expounded the advantages of being attached to an establishment which was colossal, or, as she added savingly, "had been so described by one accustomed to the contemplation of large affairs, and not prone to use the language of exaggeration." So attractive did this theme prove, that Constance escaped all further questioning that night, and made such strenuous efforts to be cheerful, that they resulted in a real headache, which kept her in bed until evening next day, and brought the doctor again. Reginald, calling, encountered the doctor, and asked him what was the matter. The doctor responded in a roundabout way, as doctors sometimes will; but he said enough to make it clear that the case was one for which some suppressed excitement was most probably answerable.

“ You had best come no more to Jotunheim, Mr. Strange ! ” said the young man to himself as he walked away sorrowfully. “ You have done mischief enough already, Val—mischief enough already. Girls are a sad trouble ! I shall be glad to see her safely married to Lumby.”

Reginald felt a considerable sense of responsibility in this matter, comfortably mingled with a feeling of diplomatic triumph. He it was who had discovered the hitch in affairs and had banished Strange. He felt proud of his own discernment and of the spirit and judgment he had displayed.

“ Constance will be getting married in a couple of months or so,” he told himself, “ and Strange will have the good sense to stay away for at least that time. And then Val’s such a butterfly fellow ! He feels all this very keenly, no doubt ; but he’ll forget all about it, and as likely as not bring back a gold-coloured bride from the West Indies.”

Comforted by these reflections, he walked on briskly. The shops were lighted up, and the evening sky was clear. The air even in

London had a prophetic sense of spring in it. Where do they come from, those wandering faint perfumed winds which sometimes, for a second merely, greet the sense of the wayfarer in London streets, and how do they keep their perfume in their journey through the city's unnamed odours? Reginald was a lover of the town rather than the country, yet the countrified scent greeting his nostrils as it passed, sent him on his way well pleased.

Suddenly, in the Regent Street crowd one face flashed out on his, and was gone again. He turned and pursued it, but failed to overtake it.

"Surely that was Gerard!" he said to himself as he passed and cast an uncertain glance before and behind him. "But what a face the fellow wore! He looked downright ghastly. I hope there's nothing the matter. All his people were well enough. The pace he was going, too! Staring straight before him, and ploughing on like a madman."

A minute later he smiled, and shook his head with a knowing air.

“Love’s a curious fever. He was going up to Chesterfield Street, and had heard that Constance was unwell. I’m getting quite knowing about the tender passion. Wonder when my turn’s coming.—No; nothing in your line to-day, Cupid. Call again.”

Beguiling time with many naïve reflections, he walked on, and near the top of the Haymarket found himself entangled with a small boy, who made proffer of an evening paper.

“O’ny a ’a’p’ny,” said the small boy appealingly, shivering before him as he walked on. “Terrible disaster at sea, sir. Orful failure in the City. O’ny a ’a’p’ny!”

The words “failure in the City” struck curiously upon his ear, and Gerard’s face, seen ten minutes before in Regent Street, came back to him in ridiculous association. He bought a paper chiefly to dispel that absurd fancy, and unfolded it near a tobacconist’s window. There he read in large letters, “Great City Failure.” The words “Lumby and Lumby” followed in some connection, but everything had suddenly grown misty, and he could not see. He stood with

a chill sickness creeping over him until his sight cleared again, and then read on.

“This afternoon, Messrs. Lumby and Lumby, the well-known merchants of Gresham Street, suspended payment. The liabilities of the firm are estimated at half a million.”

The street seemed to whirl, and he could not think. He held the rod of the tobacconist's shop-blind for a minute, and then, with uncertain step, went on again. Nothing was clear to him, within or without. The lights in the shops were hazy, like his thoughts; but out of the fog, which seemed to have fallen on the streets, came the face of his friend as he had seen it but a while ago, white and haggard and desperate.

He could read its meaning now.

CHAPTER XIX.

WALKING slowly to his hotel through streets which had a half-awakened air about them, as if they, like himself, had been turning night into day, Mr. Lumby was conscious of a singular sensation. It was as if an elastic cord alternately tightened and relaxed itself within his head. The tightening was terrible; the relaxation brought with it a feeling of looseness in the brain, as though it had lost its boundaries. These symptoms recurred slowly at first; but after a little time the cord began to tighten and relax itself at an astonishing pace, and this, before he had gone far, resulted in a splitting headache and a sense of stupefaction.

"I have been over-excited," said the merchant to himself as he passed his hand across his forehead, and stood for a moment bare-

headed in the chill morning air. "Now I come to think of it, I have been terribly excited. Yes; it has been an exciting time—quite an exciting time. We have had a near shave, Gerard—a near shave."

Rousing himself to a knowledge of the fact that he was standing uncovered in the street, and seeing that a shop-boy had paused in the act of taking down shutters to stare at him, he resumed his hat and walked on. He seemed to take the matter very calmly now, he thought. A minute later last night, and Garling might have been triumphant after all.

"Yes," he repeated vaguely, "it was a near shave."

The tightening and relaxing cord in his head seemed in some inexplicable way to have got hold of that phrase—"a near shave" with a tug of pain—"a near shave" with a sense of laxness and a loss of the brain's boundaries, as though it were unfenced, and flowed out loose until the tug came and drew it together again with "a near shave" for watchword.

He was dimly conscious that his physical

condition involved a mental condition which was as unusual as itself. The pain in his head was becoming unbearable when he reached the hotel. Boots, again amazed by his appearance at this abnormal hour, asked if he could do anything for him.

"A near shave," said the merchant vaguely.

"Shave, sir?" said the boots. "Send for barber, sir, d'rec'ly, sir."

"No; never mind that," said Mr. Lumby, awakening as if from a dream of fog, with a headache and one persistent phrase in it. "Bring me a cup of tea—strong tea—unusually strong tea."

"Yes, sir," said the boots; "d'rec'ly, sir." That was boot's formula.—"Looks awful ill," he thought, looking after the merchant. "Odd thing for a elderly cove like him to be out all night two nights running. Ain't it, now? And he never was a frisky cove neither—not when he was young."

Boots was getting elderly, and remembered Mr. Lumby this many a year, and had an interest in him. He hurried off now for the tea, and was curious or interested enough—

not having much upon his hands just then—to see it made and to volunteer to take it up himself. He was a sort of idealized boots, and had two other actual boots beneath him. His function at his present time of life consisted chiefly in telling the way to everywhere, the cab fare to everywhere, and the time of starting of all trains at all stations—an occupation purely intellectual, and making large demands on the mental resources. Mr. Lumby in the eyes of boots was as important a person as a prime minister, if indeed a prime minister could have come into measurable distance with him. The head of a great City house, member of parliament for his county, who might have been lord mayor as often as Dick Whittington if he had chosen, was necessarily a figure in that old-fashioned City hostel, where his father and grandfather were remembered as guests before him.

Boots found the great man sitting on the bed, and noticed that he looked not only ill, but bewildered.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the boots; “you’re lookin’ uncommon seedy, sir. Shall I pull

your boots off, sir?" He was down upon his knees at this task at once.—"Can't ha' been a-drinking?" he thought, looking up at the venerable face above him. "Been a-watching by a sick-bed," he concluded charitably; "that's more likely. That's where he's brought that troubled look from."

"Give me the tea, if you please," said the merchant, with a sudden awakening look. "I have a very bad headache.—Boots!"

"Yes, sir."

"I have business," said the great man, rising teacup in hand, and speaking and looking a little vacantly, "important business at—— I have business"—he was bright and clear again—"at ten o'clock. I have time for an hour's sleep. Call me in an hour, and bring me another cup of strong hot tea. And I will take a hot bath." He drank the tea, and passed his hand across his eyes; then knitting his fingers, pressed both palms heavily against his forehead; and in that attitude walked twice or thrice across the room and back again. "In an hour's time, boots," he added, as that

functionary was about to close the door—"not later."

Being left alone, he partly undressed, and wrapping himself in a warm dressing-gown, stretched himself on the bed, and almost instantly fell asleep. So profound was his brief slumber, that when at the end of an hour boots returned, and, beginning to make preparations for the bath, awoke him, Lumby found it difficult to believe that he had been left to himself more than a minute. It cost him a severe effort to rise; and no sooner was he erect again than the cord within his head began once more to tighten and relax itself, and the aching sense of stupefaction returned. But a bath, a complete change of clothing, and a cup of strong tea, made no bad substitutes for a night's sleep, and he went out refreshed to meet Garling.

Looking back at the condition into which he had fallen on first entering the street, nearly two hours before, he felt some alarm—of a retrospective sort—at the symptoms.

"It was no wonder," he said, as he walked briskly on, trying to forget his headache or

to walk beyond it. "The strain had been very terrible." He was yet too near the edge of the precipice to dare to think much of the terrors he had escaped from. "A little more of that," he told himself, "and I might have gone mad. I must be very cool and wary of excitement now."

He reached the offices, and walked in square and upright. If he had been closely noticed, it would have been seen that his eyes were filmy, and that the flushed colour of his skin was of a different hue from that healthy redness of complexion which his face commonly wore, proof of a pure life and a good digestion. It wanted a few minutes of the hour, and there were but one or two of the clerks yet arrived. These, as the chief went squarely along nodding here and there, noticed nothing unusual in him.

Nor did any one observe any especial change in Garling when, two or three minutes later, and punctual to his hour as ever, he paced slowly in, with his hands behind him and his furtive eyes bent downwards. Garling had not meant to be here

again. He was not an imaginative man by conscious practice, but no man ever had great mental powers without the imaginative faculty being in strong force amongst them, and Garling felt like a ghost revisiting old haunts.

He did not greatly care about being defeated, and he thought that curious. It was in remarkable contradiction to his sense of almost absolute indifference that when, in the course of dressing after his employer's departure, he had made preparations for shaving, he was compelled to huddle away his razors and lock them up, in a sudden terror-stricken distrust of his own will. It would be too powerful a temptation—not to him, for his indifference astonished him—to his hand. He noticed that as a phenomenon hitherto unobserved, or, until now, outside his experience, and thought it would be psychologically interesting to know if suicides were ever committed in that mood and manner.

Once or twice, as a matter of mere theory, and not as having much relation to himself, he wondered whether Lumby had left him

any loophole of escape. He had left him two hours alone. What might have been done in two hours? To re-secure his fraudulent gains, nothing. To escape?—he had nothing to escape from. His personal liberty was guaranteed already, under certain conditions. One of them was that he should present himself at the offices at ten o'clock. He went thither automatically, with the sense of a ghostly revisiting of old scenes and resumption of old habits accompanying him and growing upon him all the way. He had been sleepless for two nights, and had a feeling of dreaming awake, and of walking in an atmosphere of nightmare, which might take shape at any moment in such forms as only the dreadful hollows of dark night can hold.

And so, almost exhausted on either side, the two combatants met again. On Garling's entrance, Mr. Lumby arose and locked the door. He had waited in the room which the cashier had always used; and now resuming the seat from which Garling's coming had disturbed him, he waved him to another on the opposite side of the table. It was the

seat the regular occupant had been in the habit of offering to visitors. The cashier had an oddly vivid feeling as he took it of being now a stranger in the place. There was no bitterness of defeat in this: it tickled him a little, and he suppressed a smile. He was puzzled to define the humour of the situation, but it was there, none the less. Lumby, for his part, between the racking headache which had again attacked him, and the sleepy stupor which dwelt on all his faculties, had to make an effort to decide within himself for what purpose he had called Garling there. There was silence for a space of perhaps half a minute.

"One thing was omitted when we parted this morning," said the merchant coldly, having regained the lost thread of his thoughts. "I have your written confession here, and your statement of the funds which lie in your name at the bank at Madrid. I want now your order for the transference of those funds to the Bank of England, to be placed there to the credit of the house."

"The sum is a large one," said Garling,

"and they will more easily meet the demand if it were made by instalments. Say fifty thousand now, and fifty thousand fortnightly afterwards, until the whole is withdrawn."

"Say weekly," said the merchant.

"Very well," returned Garling.

"I shall require you to accompany me to the bank, and to have inquiries wired to their agents in Madrid."

"Very well," said Garling again.

"Your being here this morning is a proof that you recognize the futility of any attempt to escape until your restoration is completed. Your only safety lies in obedience. My pledge will not operate a moment beyond your failure or rebellion."

"I understand," responded Garling.

"Prepare the necessary drafts," said the merchant, rising, "and bring them to me. Before I leave you, surrender your keys. Be ready to accompany me to the bank by mid-day."

Garling produced his keys, and suppressing an inclination to fling them on the table, laid them gravely down. Where was the

use of a demonstration of rebellion when he was bound body and soul? Mr. Lumby took them up, unlocked the drawer in which he had placed Garling's confession, withdrew that document, and placed it in the safe, the cashier watching him all the while with wicked furtiveness. Next, the merchant laid a heavy hand upon the bell.

"Ask Mr. Barnes to come to me," he said to the messenger who answered to the summons. After a short pause, enter Mr. Barnes, a placid but keen-looking man, with a frame of wiry hair about a healthy-hued face, and calm gray eyes which looked through gold-rimmed spectacles. "Mr. Barnes," said the merchant.—Mr. Barnes bowed ever so slightly.—"You will take your place in this room, if you please, until you receive further instructions. Attend to these matters in the first instance"—waving a hand towards the heaped documents and letters on the table—"and take to-day the general direction of affairs. The matter need not at present be mentioned, but Mr. Garling has ceased to hold any connection with the firm."

Mr. Barnes was like one thunderstruck by this intelligence. If he had been told that Jupiter had ceased to have any connection with the planetary system, it could not have hit him harder. And in that supposititious case there would have been the refuge of unbelief to fall back upon, whilst here he was bound not to question for a moment. It was not a specified part of the merchant's undertaking with the cashier that his crime should be kept a secret, but there were many reasons which made that seem advisable. Lumby's own self-esteem went strongly in that direction, and the firm had not been accustomed to the employment of fraudulent servants. His pride in the probity of the house seemed smirched by this associate villainy, and he was not wishful to spread such a sentiment in other minds. The newly appointed cashier being left to his own amazement, came out of it gradually, with a general verdict of—something wrong somewhere.

“Is it your desire that I should send for the necessary forms, or myself apply for

them?" asked Garling, addressing Mr. Lumby, in his ordinary business tone.

"As you please," he answered. "Be ready to accompany me at noon.—You will see to those matters, Mr. Barnes." The merchant withdrew into his own room and closed the sliding panel.

"Safe," he thought, "quite safe now;" and, reaching with something of a blinded groping motion for a chair, he sat down and turned himself to the table. How horribly his head ached! It was well he had been able to keep a clear mind so far, and carry the situation through to this point. Thinking of what the consequences might have been, but for his seemingly accidental resolve to impeach Garling without waiting for further discoveries, he half started from his chair twice or thrice. That awful cord was tightening and loosening in his head again, and he could scarcely see for pain. An hour or two more and he would be free to rest. The excitement had been too much for him, and he would go back to the hotel and sleep it off. Sleep was all he wanted. The strain had been more than he

knew of at the time, and he was not so young as he had been. Thinking thus, he sat with his arms lying heavily on the table, and with his head depending downwards heavily. More and more leaden grew the weight of pain, and at length his head drooped on his arms, and he fell asleep once more.

Garling meanwhile was in the street, walking to the bank. To be free as he was and yet bound as he was, seemed an anomaly. He was going to surrender all his evil gains, and he was no worse nor better off than if he had lived a life of honesty, except in the estimation of men for whom he had no regard. The physical conditions were perhaps answerable for a part of his indifference. He was too worn out to feel keenly. The usual greetings met him as he walked, and he responded to them in his usual way, by bending his bent head a little lower. Eminent capitalists remarked that morning that Garling was looking worn, and afterwards speaking in the light of later events, called upon other eminent capitalists to corroborate the assertion that they had made that observation.

With no change in his common business manner, Garling secured the necessary forms, and returning, filled them up at his own table, sitting in the visitor's chair and facing the wonder-stricken Mr. Barnes. Every now and then the promoted officer glanced at the resigned or—dismissed? Surely that last was impossible. Garling the long-headed, Garling the keen, the imperious, a match for any ten cashiers and managers in London for nous and acumen and knowledge of the world, the pearl of business men, dismissed? Never. And Garling's manner set that thought at rest. He was just the same as ever, except that he had been used to be always so busy, and was now, by way of added wonder, idle.

When he had filled up the necessary forms and had everything ready for the merchant's inspection and use, he took up the daily paper, which lay upon the table, and feigned to read it. So far as he was concerned, it was an idle feigning, for he scarcely had the heart to read a word, but he sat there with stupendous patience and self-control and made no sign. Mr. Barnes was evidently agitated by curiosity;

and Garling, though he had no purpose in foiling him, yet found the baffling of that curiosity a help to him. It whiled away the time, and suited the weary venom of his mood to sit there impassive and worry Barnes, and occasionally to meet Barnes's glance of wonder with one of keen discovery, and to make him uncomfortable in that way.

But the fire of Remorse, which in some hearts is only to be lighted by failure, was already in this pause beginning to burn in him, and to bring him a foretaste of its agonies. He had failed! In the very hour of his triumph he had failed. There was nine years' work wasted—thrown away. On the very results of his fraud the great house would prosper, for he had worked for its prosperity that he might make his fraud the larger. Let him care as little as he might, let him be as indifferent as he would, it was ignominious. He had failed. Failure is always bitter, but it is ten times bitter to the detected rogue.

And now his own ingratitude began to gnaw at him; a crime spurned by his steel-

armed conscience this nine years past, crept in through a crevice in the shattered armour and began to gnaw at him. And shame wreathed a first cold coil about his heart and sickened him. Then one thought suddenly took him by the very soul. This vengeance came upon him through his desertion of his wife and child, and one crime was made a whip to scourge another. Was the world a chaos of chances, after all, if such a thing as this could be? It was clear that Lumby had overheard the colloquy between that insolent Yankee and himself; clear that this had excited suspicion in his mind; clear that he had that night disturbed the ledger which held the account of Garling's first year of stewardship, and had so detected him. This heaped bitterness on bitterness, and set the sting of his long-deadened conscience to bite deeper. Bah! Why distress himself about that world-old superstition, long since destroyed by philosophy, and condemned by common sense? Yet he could not shake off the fear, and it dug at the foundations of all his strength; for if it were truly founded, he had

thrown away more than a rare plot and lost more than a great fortune.

Twelve o'clock at last.

"Mr. Barnes," said Garling, with an unconscious use of his old habit of command, "be so good as to tell Mr. Lumby that it is midday, and that I am ready for him."

Mr. Barnes, with an unconscious use of his old habit of obedience, arose and tapped at the sliding panel. No answer. He tried to thrust it on one side; but the bolt was fastened. He rapped again, more loudly. No answer. He went round to the side-door and rapped at that, and still receiving no response essayed to open it, but discovered that it also was fastened.

"He must have gone out," said Mr. Barnes, returning; "but I did not hear him."

"Nor did I," returned Garling. So that he performed his share of the contract, what did it matter to him whether the merchant kept his or left it unkept? If he chose to be ruined, let him be ruined. He would want money at the bank soon enough, unless Garling were mistaken, and that could not come

about very easily. The new cashier and the old sat on together until the luncheon-hour, when Mr. Barnes went out. At two o'clock he returned, and sat down before a new pile of letters. One of these he handed to Garling.

"This concerns you, Mr. Garling," he said. It was Garling's roundabout note to Lumby, returned by the Liverpool firm, as having been enclosed to them in error.

"Clumsy fool!" said Garling to himself, not taking time to think that it mattered no longer. "Why not have sent it straight on without enclosing it?"

Then he smiled bitterly at his own want of apprehension, and absently tore the useless fraud across and threw it into the waste-paper basket. This futile reminder of all his futile plans stung him a little. There were stings enough within him, but he would not writhe. Mr. Barnes was looking to see whether this odd note had any effect on Garling, and the defrauder held himself and gave no sign. When men knew that he was defeated, they should have no chance to say that they had seen him shaken by defeat.

Another hour went by, and Mr. Barnes, at Garling's bidding, again rapped at the sliding panel, and again tried both it and the door with no result. A new alarm was presenting itself to Garling. It was patent that if matters went too far, and the firm was shaken, the promise of immunity he held might after all avail him little. He sat thinking uneasily of this for another half-hour, and had almost resolved to rise and batter at the door until he received an answer—for he was certain that the merchant had fallen asleep within—when a clerk came hurriedly up announcing the arrival of a messenger from the bank, who wished to see either Mr. Lumby himself or Mr. Garling on business of importance. Nobody could guess how important that business was, half so well as Garling. The ruin he had planned might be coming on already—might well have begun even now, and if it fell whilst he was in England, nothing could save him. The power would have passed from his employer's hands, and the promise he had given would not be worth a straw.

"Anybody in Number Thirteen?" asked Garling.

"No, sir," said the clerk who had brought the message.

"Then show Mr. Sonning in there."

The clerk was gone, and Garling went to meet the bank messenger. The tale he had to tell was brief and to the point. The account of the firm was at its last ebb, and cheques to the amount of two or three thousand pounds, bearing the firm's signature, had been passed in—fortunately not presented for payment. "We pay in fifty thousand pounds this afternoon," said Garling. "Mr. Lumby is in town, and had made arrangements to meet me at noon to-day for that purpose. We shall follow you at once."

"We were surprised at the great drafts you have been making lately," said the bank's ambassador, who was a man in authority.

"No doubt," said Garling—"no doubt. Had there been any stress, Mr. Lumby would have transferred a portion of his private account. We shall follow directly."

The messenger withdrew smilingly. There was no doubt about Lumby and Lumby. The senior partner's private account, swollen year by year for many years past, was enough to show their solidity. Still, if Garling could act so recklessly as this, there was at least room for other business men to gain a little credit for themselves. There was some comfort in thinking that Garling was not quite immaculate. For one moment, when the messenger had gone, Garling stood with a diabolic rebellion in his heart and eyes. Fate forced him to rescue the firm for his own sake, but he had well-nigh courage and hate enough to risk his own ruin in the crash of the falling house. No! There were still chances in the world even for him. He walked swiftly to the door of Lumby's room and rained down blows upon its panels with his clenched hand. Mr. Barnes came running into the corridor to ask what was the matter, and Garling, seeing that he carried a heavy ruler, took it from him and made a very storm of noise. A voice answered from within, and the head

of the firm, looking, to Mr. Barnes's wild astonishment, like a drunken man, threw open the door. Garling entered the room, closed the door in his successor's face, and accosted his late employer.

"Be quick, or you will be too late. A messenger from the bank has been here to say that the firm's account is overdrawn, and that there are heavy demands to meet." He shot back the bolt and threw open the sliding panel.—"Mr. Barnes," he said, cool and calm as ever, "oblige me by sending for a hansom. At once, if you please." The astounded Barnes, once more shut out by the returning of the panel, rang the bell and transmitted Garling's order. The merchant facing Garling looked dazed and overwhelmed with sleep. "I have everything in readiness," said the ex-cashier. "Come with me—there is not a minute to lose."

Lumby looked stupidly at his watch. "A quarter to four," he said heavily. "What is the matter?"

"Come with me," repeated Garling. "Compose yourself. If you go to the bank with

such an air as this, the town will declare you bankrupt. You look it." He spoke with quiet scorn, not hurried by the pressure of events or swayed out of his usual possession of himself.

"I have been asleep," said the merchant. "What is the matter?"

"Ruin is the matter!" cried Garling, stirred at last.—Barnes in the next room heard those awful unbelievable words, and dropped into his chair white as a ghost.—"Come with me, and wake up by the way."

If they were late, Garling would not set his liberty at a pin's fee. The merchant, looking weakly round, took up his hat with a shaking hand and began to draw on his gloves.

"Have you the drafts made out?" he asked.

"Yes," said Garling, thrusting them upon him with both hands. "Come!"

There was a horrible impatience on him now, and a fear lest they should lose the hour. He had to stifle this hurry and dread, whilst he walked behind Lumby through the

offices. The merchant's aspect awakened surmises among the clerks, and it was told afterwards how his hands shook and how pale he was. A hansom was standing already at the door, and they both entered. Garling gave his instructions to the driver; the man touched his horse with his whip, and they started.

"There is ample time," said the merchant to himself, consulting his watch again. "I could walk to the bank in less than the time we have."

His face lost its flushed and excited look, and the old expression came back into his eyes. He drew himself together and crossed his arms upon his breast, holding in his right hand the documents which meant recovered fortune and an unsoiled name. As his mind began to play again, he fathomed the reason of Garling's urgency.

"A curious situation," he said almost complacently. "Was ever scoundrel so anxious to disgorge before?"

CHAPTER XX.

CHEAPSIDE was unusually crowded that afternoon, and both men being eager to get on, the impediments to traffic exaggerated themselves and became irritating. Garling lifted the little trap in the roof of the cab and snarled at the driver. "Drive!" The driver being also irritated by the obstacles he met, snarled back at him, and picking his way among cabs, omnibuses, and waggons, cast loose anathemas right and left as boys throw crackers. In a little time they got behind an omnibus, and the driver being compelled to adapt his speed to that of the vehicle before him, broke in a wordy hailstorm on the conductor, who, turning upon him a smiling visage, winked slowly and laboriously, and condescended no other answer. The cabman, naturally incensed, slanged him with all the

eloquence of wrath. The omnibus stopped to pick up a stout old lady; and the conductor, taking advantage of the pause, addressed the driver of the cab with smooth satire.

"You shouldn't want to take the bread out of poor folks' mouths, your R'yal Highness. Get down, and let the cabman drive. He's used to it."

Garling looked up at the sound of the voice, and saw Hiram Search. Hiram, beaming all over with the consciousness of his own humour, caught Garling's eye at that moment, and raised his hat to him with a genial flourish.

Lumby sat back in the cab with his arms across his breast, trying to be calm, but relapsing into his old flurried condition, and anxious to be in time. The 'bus got into motion again, and the cab followed, slowly, the cabman swearing as terribly as, according to Captain Shandy, our army did in Flanders. Hiram, with much apparent interest, demanded to know where he preached on Sundays; and winked at Garling, as if to ask him what he thought of that, in the way of

genteel repartee. There was almost nothing but the horse's length between Garling and the destroyer of his plans, and to see him there thus insolently gleeful and familiar, was more than gall and wormwood. The 'bus being pulled up very suddenly, the cab-horse's nose almost entered at the window.

"Going to Whitechapel?" asked Hiram of the driver sweetly. "Don't keep us waiting. Get in, sir, get in. We'll take care of you."

Having delivered himself of this sally, he winked again at Garling, who was by this time half mad with rage, and only held himself in by a supreme effort.

"Hiram!" cried a faint pleading voice from the pavement, and a hand touched the conductor's arm as he swung by his strap, inspecting the crowd with a knowing eye, as if he were choosing prize passengers. He turned, and there was Mary, looking pale and frightened, and bearing on her face the mark of recent tears. Hiram rang his bell to stop the omnibus, and leaped to the pavement. Garling saw the little figure also, and

maddened, feeling that his dead wife's vengeance was indeed beginning, in spite of her forgiveness. But a second later, the sight of the little satchel Mary carried in her hand banished all other things from his mind. He had until that moment forgotten it as completely as though it had been of no value. The shock of detection, the struggle for self-mastery, the shame and rage which had crowded on him since he had felt his employer's arresting and accusing hand, had left no room for the thought of minor troubles.

"What is it?" cried Hiram, bending over the worn face. "What is it?"

"He has left me!" she answered. "The house is locked." Her lips were trembling; and he, forgetting where he stood, took both her hands in his, and felt them cold. "I don't know where to go. He said we were going to Southampton, and put me in the train, and left me."

"Left you!" cried Hiram. "Why, there he is!"

"Where?" she asked, shrinking to him as if from some imagined fear.

At that moment Garling's hand was laid upon the satchel.

"Give this to me!" he said hoarsely. "Go home—go home!" She held tightly to the bag; but he wrenched it from her hand, and returned to the cab. "Drive on!" he cried with a terrible execration, standing behind the splash-board and facing the driver. The cabman shook his head up and down with a countenance in which mute appeal against the unreasonableness of this direction was blent with scorn and pity.

"What is all this?" asked Lumby, as Garling threw himself into the seat again.

"What is it?" mocked Garling, gnashing at him. "Ask what it was to-morrow."

Lumby looked at him with scornful wonder, not unmixed with fear. "We shall be late," he said. "Had we not better walk?"

They left the cab together; and Garling snarled to the driver to go to the office for payment, and strove whilst Lumby held his arm to struggle through the crowd. But the crowd had on a sudden grown dense.

There was a dead-lock in the horseway, and on the footpath the people were crushed together looking at it. The beginning of anger, as the wise man said, is like the letting in of waters, and Garling was now fairly raging. When at last they reached the limits of the crowd, and found a straight course before them, suddenly, loud and clear, clanged out the clock of Bow Church, striking the hour. At that they turned pale faces on each other, and Lumby released Garling's arm. The great bell of Paul's followed, booming above the roar of the street and the general babel of sound only for the ears that waited for it. And in both minds the same imagined sight was present; each saw the image of a closing door.

"It will be known before nightfall," said Lumby, fixing his eyes on Garling in accusation.

"Why should it?" he responded. "You have everything in hand, and it will be a brutem fulmen at the worst. Be at the bank by ten o'clock in the morning."

The merchant turned, thrusting the drafts

into his breast-pocket, and walked back, with bent head, despondent face, and heavy heart; and his mechanical steps led him to the offices. It was not a difficult thing for Garling to hang behind and lose his late employer for a moment in the crowd. He was absent from the merchant's thoughts, and that made the task still easier. And having lost him for a moment, it was the easiest thing in the world to slip into a hansom cab outside the block and drive away. Ample need to drive away as matters stood. For a whisper once started in the City would swell ere long into a roar, and in that roar he could already hear in fancy his own name. He would be gone before the storm could burst. The house would weather it easily enough, and within his grinding teeth he cursed the house. But his own crime would be known, and his defeat. There was the sting he dreaded. Before that he was a coward. He could have borne to be spoken of as a successful scoundrel; but to be pointed at as a detected rogue, compelled to resign his booty, and then scornfully dismissed, would have been unen-

urable, was unendurable to think of, and had yet to be endured.

There was whispering and putting of heads together in the offices of Lumby and Lumby. Barnes sat in Garling's seat, and there was a look of amazed misery upon his face which struck all who saw him there. The head of the firm had been locked in his own room all day; and after the coming of the bank messenger he had gone out tremulous and fevered, and had returned as if from a fruitless errand, hanging his head, and looking like a ghost. Garling, even the impenetrable Garling, had looked worn and gray. There was a vague suspicion as to what these portents might mean, which filled the very air, and made the whisperings needless to carry it from mind to mind. And, to set on all surmise the seal of dreadful certainty, it was known somehow before five o'clock, by the very messengers, that just before the closing of the bank a cheque had been presented and returned with the statement that there were no effects to meet it. The flying

Garling might well have foreseen this last disaster.

But not everybody in the place knew of this open shame to the old craft which had sailed triumphantly through so much evil weather since it was launched one hundred and thirty years ago. Not the master of the ship. No man told him as yet of that disaster. He sat alone, separated from the grieving, faithful Barnes only by the sliding panel of corrugated glass. The time for departure had gone by ; but Barnes waited, fain to offer consolation, if he had but dared, or known how to offer it. At length he went round by the corridor and tapped humbly at the door. "Come in," cried the merchant in a dejected voice, and Barnes entered.

"What are your instructions for to-morrow, sir?" asked Barnes.

"You will hold the same place," returned his employer, looking up at him with a withered smile. "You may consider yourself promoted permanently.—Where is Garling?" he asked suddenly, rising with a startled air.

"Mr. Garling has not returned," answered Barnes, "since you and he went out an hour ago."

"Not returned!" said Lumby, taking one quick step forward and halting suddenly.

"No matter.—Mr. Barnes!"

"Yes, sir."

"We will go through matters to-morrow, and I shall have to place some confidences in you, which I shall rely upon you to respect."

Barnes's heart ached. Was it possible Lumby did not know that the expected crash was the town's talk already?

"We have passed through a grave crisis, which has left almost everything disarranged, and there will be work to do for weeks to come. We will talk of these things to-morrow. I have had a time of great anxiety, and I am tired."

Barnes's face brightened, and he said eagerly, "You will be able to put things straight again, sir?"

The merchant looked at him wonderingly.

"What do you know about this matter,

Mr. Barnes?" There was no one to hear their talk, but by instinct he closed the door.

"The cheque presented at the bank last thing this afternoon, sir. It is talked about already. I am told that Rawlings and Co., relying on the name of the firm, got it cashed privately after it was refused by the bank. They were always very questionable people, sir, Rawlings and Co."

"The cheque?" said the merchant, "refused this afternoon? Why, what is this?"

"Is it possible that you don't know, sir?" cried Barnes. "Rawlings was paid by cheque yesterday—two, five, five, odd. The cheque was presented this afternoon, and the bank returned it, marked "No effects." I am afraid, sir, it is talked about."

Lumby strode up and down the room, deeply moved by this discovery.

"This is bad news, Barnes," he said—"bad news. I had hoped to escape anything of that sort. But it will be all right to-morrow. Be here at the usual time in the morning. If you hear any rumour against the solidity of the firm, I authorize you to offer it the

fullest and roundest denial. Do you hear? —the fullest and roundest denial. You shall know all to-morrow. I am too fatigued to attend to business now. Good night."

"Good night, sir," returned Barnes, and went his way, lifted up in spirit, but still puzzled. "If he heard any rumour"—rumour? There was no rumour, but a roar of downright news, and wherever Barnes went he heard it. Wherever he heard it, he denied it; as a matter of personal knowledge, he denied it; being personally in the full confidence of the firm, he assured assailants right and left that there was nothing in it. And as when wind and tide go contrary ways there is a greater tumult than when both go together, this authoritative contradiction made the roar the louder, and spread it wider.

Lumby, left alone, raised his face towards the skylight in a sort of passionate exultation and triumph for a moment, and drooped it again in anguish. The house was saved; Heaven had been merciful, villainy had been discomfited, and the house was saved; but

the good old name was soiled. The British merchant found a doubt upon his name as intolerable as the ermine finds a spot upon its fur. Never a breath upon the name until to-day, and now it was soiled—soiled! How could the return of a cheque from such a house fail to be talked of?

That awful cord began to tighten and loosen in his brain again, and his eyes grew hot and his hands clammy. He entered the cashier's room, intending to place the drafts in the safe, and then go home to his hotel and send for a physician. But, having opened the safe, the confession Garling had written lay before him, and he must needs take it up and look at the rogue's balance-sheet at the end. From it he referred to the drafts, to see if between them they made up the sum set down there. Next, after standing for a while irresolute, he drew the gigantic ledger from its place, and laying it on the table, turned to the leaf on which he had first fixed the fraud, and compared the pencilled marks he had made upon the margin with Garling's first entry. The two exactly tallied.

He stooped above the book a moment, holding the drafts and the confession in his hands, then dropped them on the broad leaves, and knitting his fingers, pressed both palms above his forehead, and took a step or two across the room and back again. There was a hunted feeling in his mind, a hurry and confusion, a dim sense that any moment might bring shipwreck, that there were things to do, which, being done, would avert all chance of mischief; but, like a man in a nightmare, he could only grope in thought, and everything was blind and dark.

What was the fear that threatened him? Where was the way of safety? If this hideous pain would only let him think a while!

He reeled a little, and stretching out his hands, caught one side of the great ledger and steadied himself by it. The cord in his head was growing tenser, and the fear that followed him drew nearer. The cord grew tenser, tenser, tenser, until at last it snapped, and the merchant, with one blind stagger sideways, closed the ledger with unconscious hands, and fell huddled on the floor.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE strong spring sunshine lay, at random broadcast, on sea and shore, and the great spring wind came roaring like the voice of a lusty giant. There was scarce a cloud in the sky, and scarce a cloud in happy Gerard's mind. Stout Roland, feeling the spring in his veins, caracoled hither and thither with arched neck and mincing feet; and Gerard felt all the horse's joy, and in the pauses of the ride lifted up his voice and sang for gladness at the eager wind and the wide sunshine and the hope of half an hour hence. He was riding to see Constance, and that of itself was enough; and besides, Gerard was one of those men to whom riding is the most delightful of all physical pleasures. So, with Roland curveting and prancing and making a mighty pretence of scorn at all things—

with a tender measured fineness in every motion all the while—Gerard came up to the lodge-gates of the Grange, and called for the lodge-keeper with a voice of jollity. Out she came, shading her eyes from the bright light, an old woman, who had kept the lodge for the old family.

“They be all gone to town, Muster Lumby,” said the old woman.

“Gone to town?” asked Gerard in a voice of disbelief.

“Yes, sir,” said the old lady, “all the family.”

Gerard sat without reply for one dismal minute, and then turned away. He hung his head on the road back. There was no pleasure in the keen wind and bright sunshine on the homeward ride. Home reached, he found a note, just delivered by one of the Grange servants. It came from Constance, and ran thus :

DEAR GERARD,

My father and Reginald are both going to town, and since I cannot be left in

this great house alone, I am to go with them, and be taken to my Aunt Lucretia's. You will not forget to write to me. We shall be away for at least a week.

Yours truly,

CONSTANCE.

The note was cool enough, but all Constance's missives had been cool, and so Gerard felt the absence of no unaccustomed warmth. Yet none the less the brief iciness chilled him, and he was puzzled by the command to write, and by the absence of an address to write to. This was the first he had heard of Aunt Lucretia, and he knew no more of her whereabouts than the note told him. He had a reticence about writing to Constance through her father, whose address he knew; and he felt, with a proud sense of undeserved injury, that if she had of purpose aforethought omitted her address, he would wait until she sent it to him. The bright spring hours began to go heavily. Val Strange had disappeared, and Gerard was lonely and altogether ill at ease, until

on Thursday morning came a telegram, dated from the offices of the firm, under the hand of Mr. Barnes: "Please come to town by first train. Make no delay."

"Your father has been away four days, Gerard," said Mrs. Lumby, "and has never written me a line. This is very unusual, and it makes me a little anxious. You must tell him to write at once."

The call to town revived Gerard's spirits. He was going to have a fortune put into his hands, and that meant freedom to marry so soon as Constance could be persuaded.

"All right, mother," he answered lightly, kissing her. "I won't forget.—Good-bye, Milly. Get ready," he added, with a compound smile, in which a most hangdog aspect blended comically with a beaming joyousness—"get ready for your orange blossoms."

"Bridesmaids don't wear orange blossoms, Gerard," cried Milly.

"Don't they?" said Gerard. "Then get ready for your own."

Milly nodded gaily from the hall; the young fellow got into the dogcart beside

the groom, and waving his hand, drove away. Pleasant thoughts were with him on his journey, and his spirits seemed to leap the higher for their late depression, as a branch released swings upwards. His little bitterness about Constance was all dispelled; and as he rode through London streets towards the offices he whistled like the mavis.

Looks are not easy to define, or Gerard might have read pity in the face of the very porter at the doors, and pity again in the face of elderly Johnson at his desk.

"Good morning, Johnson," said Gerard cheerily. "Is my father here?"

"No, sir," said Johnson. "Mr. Lionel and Mr. George are upstairs."

Mr. Lionel and Mr. George were the junior partners, Gerard's cousins. There was a marked sadness on the old man's brow, and a melancholy quaver in his voice.

"How glum you Londoners are, Johnson!" said the young fellow. "Why, if you meet a ploughman in the country, you hear him whistling—out of tune most likely, but still whistling. They catch the habit from the

birds, perhaps. But all you people look as if you were assisting at a funeral."

"This way, sir," said Johnson. "Allow me." He led the way upstairs, turning half round to Gerard with a respectful bend. In the room which had been Garling's, sat Mr. Barnes and the junior partners.

"Good day, George," said Gerard cheerily. "Good day, Lionel.—How d'ye do, Barnes? All here to help me into El Dorado, I suppose.—Where's the governor?"

The cousins shook hands with him solemnly, and Barnes bowed with saddened visage.

"Well, upon my word," said Gerard, looking from one to the other, "you're a cheerful lot, to be sure!"

As he looked, his own face caught something of the shadow which lay on theirs.

"Sit down," said his cousin Lionel. "We are in trouble here.—Mr. Barnes, tell him all you know."

"First of all," said Gerard anxiously, looking from one to another, "where is my father?"

"At his hotel," said Cousin George. "He

is not well ; in fact, he is seriously unwell ; but don't be afraid for him. Sit down.—Tell what you know, Barnes."

At that, Barnes told all he knew, as we know it already ; and Gerard listened amazed, almost beyond amazement.

"In the course of the evening," pursued Barnes, "I met Mr. Lionel and Mr. George. They had heard of the unfortunate circumstance of the cheque, and I gave them your father's assurance that everything would be right to-day. We were all naturally anxious, and we arranged to meet here at nine o'clock this morning—an hour earlier than usual. Mr. Lionel and Mr. George will tell you that they called at your father's hotel and could hear no news of him."

"I called," said Lionel, breaking in gravely, "at Garling's place, to see if he knew anything. They told me he was away—the people at the shop beneath the rooms he lived in—he had gone away with a lady on Tuesday night."

"With a lady ?" cried Gerard.

"A young lady," returned Cousin Lionel.

“He has taken an extra room for her some days before, and spoke of her as his daughter. She called him her father; and their joint story was credited.”

Gerard sank back in his chair, feeling like a man in a nightmare.

Barnes went on with his story, from which it appeared that the three, reaching the offices at the appointed hour, found the night porter and his wife in a terrible flutter of alarm and excitement, having two hours before discovered the head of the firm insensible upon the floor of that room.

“It was probably providential,” said Barnes in conclusion, “that, in falling, he had slightly wounded himself and had lost a little blood. I am bound to say that the watchman and his wife seem to have acted with great promptitude. The man ran at once for a surgeon. Your father was removed to his hotel; a physician was sent for, and everything that skill could suggest had been done before our arrival.”

Gerard saw despair confronting him, and but an hour ago he had been so happy!

"We have done what we could here," said George Lumby, rising and folding his arms across a burly chest. "We have turned over the whole of our private balances to the credit of the firm. That is but a drop in the ocean," he added sorrowfully; "but"—lifting his head and striding across the room—"it may help us after all."

"We conjecture," said Lionel, "that your father knows something we do not know, and we think that if we can tide over a day or two he may save us. George and I have given instructions to realize on all stock we hold, and we may make a stand. But the cheque yesterday, and Garling's flight, and your father's sudden illness, have an ugly look. We are talked about everywhere, and we expect to be pressed. The small-fry have been at us already, and have been paid. We shall stand out as long as we can."

The very prosperity of the firm had led the partners to their ruin. It had been so profitable to pour their profits anew into that great reservoir, that they had invested but little outside it, and now the treasures of the

reservoir had sunk as into some great subterranean cavern.

All day the ominous City talk went on, and men spoke of the great house as doomed. It was believed that Garling had got away with prodigious sums, and so his pre-eminence amongst keen fellows remained undisputed still. There were some adventurous spirits who were willing to take long odds against the breakage of the firm; and sportive clerks offered the market betting on the event, as if it had been a sort of City Derby. Once that day the firm was hit hard; and the junior partners took up a great bill, of which, until then, they had known nothing, and waited with what stoicism they had for the next blow to fall.

Gerard, feeling as if his heart had been one great ache, sat down and wrote a letter to his mother, disguising from her the ills that had befallen, and striving to write lightly, whilst his heart sank over every word like lead. "Do not expect to hear from either of us for a day or two," he wrote, "for we are most prodigiously busy, and .

have no news which you unbusiness-like country people would care to hear."

Mrs. Lumby reading this next day, took it for a jocular affectation of the cares of commerce worn for her amusement by the new partner, and she and Milly had a laugh over it. But a day or two actually going by, and she hearing no more, she wired a message of inquiry to the offices.

"You must answer it," said George Lumby, who took it down to the hotel to Gerard. "She will be up here, otherwise.—How is he?" nodding at the door of the sick-room.

Gerard had taken the dressing-room outside the chamber in which his father lay, and stayed there day and night.

"He knows nobody," said Gerard sadly. "Smiles at his fingers like a child, when he awakes."

"Have you spoken to him?"

"Yes. He knows nobody. The doctor says he is out of danger, bodily."

"He fears for his mind? Permanently?"

"I am afraid so," answered Gerard with a dreary sigh.

"We may go at any hour," said George gloomily—"at any hour."—Gerard answered only by another sigh.—"We are all in the same boat, Gerard. Wire to your mother, and tell her not to be alarmed, and then write to-night."

"Yes, yes," answered Gerard; and his cousin went sadly away again. At that moment the door was rapped by a waiter, who brought in letters for Gerard, redirected and sent on from the hall by Milly. He looked at them absently, and seeing that one came from Constance, he opened it and read it. She wrote as coolly as ever, but bade him come to see her if he should come to town, and gave her address this time. Icy as it was, the note would have made him happy a day or two before; and now, having read it, he laid it to his breast with a sob, and hung his head, as if to hide from the mere daylight the tears in his eyes. But recovering himself after a while, he answered his mother's message, and afterwards sat down and wrote her a cheerful letter, asking her to come to London, and telling her that

his father had been unwell, but was recovering now.

"She will think it a slight matter," he thought; "and why should she be troubled, poor soul, before her time? She will be troubled enough, when she knows."

When she came next day with Milly, she found her husband sitting up in bed, with a pinched and vacant look upon his face. He knew nobody, but smiled at her—an awful smile—and talked disjointedly of things that had happened years ago. Then Gerard discovered that his kindly meant deceit was cruel; for the shock well-nigh cost his mother her wits, and for an hour or two she was pale and helpless, and as cold as marble. But a fit of crying coming to her aid, she recovered herself, and sat down beside her husband's bed; and she and Milly watched there to the exclusion of all others but Gerard and the doctors. They told her nothing of the affairs of the house, thinking one trouble enough at a time. Gerard sent no word to Constance, but waited like a man condemned until the last stroke should fall. It fell on

Tuesday, a week and a day after the elder Lumby's arrival in town. The two junior partners came together in the dusk of the afternoon, and he saw the doom of the house in their faces.

"It is all over," said the elder of the two in a commonplace voice.

"Yes," said the other. "We closed the doors at half-past two. We heard it cried by the newsboys in the streets as we came here."

Gerard took up his hat and made as if to leave the room; but there was such a look upon his face that the two cousins, exchanging a swift glance, stepped between him and the door, and each laid a hand upon him.

"Where are you going, Gerard?" asked George.

He looked at them, first at one and then at the other, and reading their fear, shook his head, and tried to smile.

"I am going to see my sweetheart," said the simple Gerard, choking down a sob. "I must tell her what has happened, and say good-bye. She can't marry a pauper; and I

don't want her to learn the news from the papers. I shan't be long away. You can keep it from my mother for a time. She has enough to bear."

"They know it in the hotel," said George. "The very waiters know it. We are all in the same boat, Gerard."

They shook hands sadly, as men before now have shaken hands in shipwreck, waiting for the shock and the plunge; and Gerard passed into the streets, and walked, deep beneath the waters of despair. How he reached the little house in Chesterfield Street he never knew; but he stood at last before the door, and asked quietly for Miss Jolly; and sent in his card and waited. It seemed long before the parlour-maid returned and marshalled him upstairs and into Constance's presence. She came with a languid grace to meet him, and held out her hand; but at the sight of his face paused, and looked at him with greatening eyes.

"I have come to say good-bye," he said. His heart was like ice in his breast.

"Good-bye?" she answered. "Gerard!"

What do you mean?" She fancied she read something like a threat in his manner. Looks are hard to read, and the reader is likely to see himself reflected in their characters. She was fresh from thinking of Val Strange. Of what was Gerard thinking?

"Yes," he answered; "I am here to say good-bye. You can't marry a pauper." His voice was strained and harsh, and he spoke with difficulty. "The house has failed. I have come to tell you so, and to give you back your freedom."

"The house has failed? The firm?"

"The firm of Lumby and Lumby is bankrupt," he responded. "I won't detain you," he added helplessly, not knowing what words found their way to his lips. "Good-bye!"

With that he turned, and suddenly flung both arms abroad with the ultimate gesture of despair and dropped them, heavily, at his sides. What could she say? What comfort could she offer? What consolation could reach him? "Work and hope, and I will wait." She was not free to say that. She might have said it to the man she loved, and

have dared her father's opposition; and poverty, and the cankering cares of waiting years, as many a maid had done before her for a true man's sake. But she had no such balm for Gerard, who, being shorn of wealth, was shorn of all.

Perhaps in some inmost corner of his heart he hoped for some command which should give him life again. Perhaps, at the sight of his despair, she half wished that she could give it. She touched him timidly on the sleeve, awed by his grief, for she knew that he had loved her well, and she guessed at something of his miseries. At that touch he turned, and for one passionate moment held her in his arms; then, with a low cry, like that of some wild creature in extreme pain, he released her, and rushed from the room and from the house.

Constance, thus left alone, was filled with many struggling emotions, amongst which it would not have been easy for any philosopher to discern the uppermost. Gerard had half frightened her by the wildness of his farewell ;

and she would have been less than woman had she been unmelted by his grief. His trouble, as it referred to her, naturally touched her less than did the loss of his fortune.

“Me?” she thought (and not unwisely, for she judged from what she knew). “He will grieve because he has lost me, perhaps for a month or two; but he will feel the loss of his fortune all his life.”

She could not, struggle as she might, disguise from herself the fact that she was pleased to be free. She had never greatly cared for him. Since that first day when the warmth of his ardour had a little touched her heart, he had never raised a thrill in her. And since then Val Strange had risen on the horizon of her life, and, in spite of herself, she had glided into such a love for him as she never guessed or dreamed before. Yes; she was sorry for Gerard, but she was pleased to be free. And yet Val had gone away; resolutely bent on curing himself, and to that end had set an inexorable distance between himself and her, and might stay away for years. Why, since it was to come, could not

Gerard's misfortune have come a week sooner ! She hated herself for that cruel thought ; but it was there, and she could not drive it from her. Poor Gerard ! She respected him greatly, and liked him, coldly ; and if she had been an empress, she would have given him a new fortune, and have taken joy in the gift. She could scarcely have been sorrier for his loss if he had been her brother. But he had many friends, and amongst them Gerard would do very well. Anything like the bitterness of downright poverty was of course impossible for him. He could never come to that.

Gerard, pacing lonely in the gas-lit streets, gave the lost fortune little thought. There was grief enough for him in his mother's grief, in his father's helplessness, in his own loss of love. He had always been so used to money that the prospect of poverty could take no hold upon him. Only those who have felt the gripe of poverty know so much as how to dread it. In the midst of his afflictions, poverty seemed likely to be the lightest, and it was certainly the only one amongst

them which a heart at once sound and gentle could at first sight scorn. It was burned into him that he had come away without one word of farewell from Constance. That seemed hard. But she had never made any great pretence at caring for him, and his thoughts began to be bitter. He was too simply noble to hold that mood long, and by-and-by he began to defend her, and to yearn over her, and to pray that whatever came to him she might be happy. He even tried to take pleasure in the belief that she had not loved him, on the ground that she would not grieve at his leaving her; but at that his sorely tried heart rebelled. He would like her to feel some grief at that—a little.

Gerard said nothing of his personal griefs to any man or woman. He avoided all mention of them to his mother even, and resolutely and heroically fought them down. But the conflict wore him thin and pale; and in the midst of all their distresses, Milly and his mother had no keener grief than this of Gerard's. The days went on, the great bankruptcy was noised abroad, and other

lesser bankruptcies followed it in due course. Garling's fraud widened in its consequences, as crimes will; and people who had never heard of him, and never did hear of him, went hungry because of him. The properties of the firm were sold at auction; the very desk at which old Johnson had sat these fifty years was knocked down to the highest bidder before the veteran's sorrowing eyes; the very ledgers went for waste paper, all but the latest; the premises themselves were sold, realizing a price so vast that creditors reading it grew easier in their minds; the senior partner's private properties were impounded with the rest, stocks and shares and balance at the banker's; and Lumby Hall was in the market.

Then it came out, when the panic was over, that there was enough for everybody, even the lawyers, and that there was a little to be saved after all. But in the middle of the distresses, and in this pale gleam of joy which followed them, the head of the great wrecked house of Lumby and Lumby sat like a child, with no more than a child's joys and a child's

sorrows, smiling at the sunlight playing on his walls, or whimpering to be lonely in the dusk. His memory was a ruin. He knew nobody.

CHAPTER XXII.

"MR. SEARCH," said that official of the Omnibus Company who controlled Hiram's destinies, "after to-day your services will not be required."

"Oh?" said Hiram. "I reckon I've got a right to ask what that's for."

"You have twice appointed a substitute without leave, and you were yesterday two hours absent from your post without even appointing a substitute. The driver tells me that the block in Cheapside was your fault, and yours only."

"He's maybe right, mister," responded the conductor. "But it won't happen again."

"I'll take care of that," said the official person.

"It'll suit me better to hold on a while," said Hiram, "if you don't mind. It's rather

an awkward corner to get throwed off at, this is. Give me another trial."

"We shall not require your services after to-day," repeated the official drily.

"Then I must try to get along without youn," responded Hiram. "'Bus-conducting ain't half such a berth as the Prince of Wales's, is it?"

"It's a pity," said the official, wagging his head at Hiram, a little mollified by the discharge of his own thunderbolt, "that you don't stick at your work, Search. You're a smart fellow, and a sober fellow; and if you'd only stick, you'd do."

"There was a minister had a nigger once, mister," returned Hiram, "and whenever he went wrong, the parson used to cowhide him. And while he cowed, he'd take a text and preach, just so as Peter shouldn't find the thing monotonous. One day, Peter turns round and kind o' makes an appeal. 'If you flog, flog,' says he; 'and if you preach, preach; but don't flog and preach too at the same time.'"

"Oh yes," said the official, wagging his

head again at Hiram with a humorous aspect; "I know that yarn. I've heard it before, Search—I've heard it before."

"Well, now," said Hiram, with a propitiatory twinkle in his eyes, "I go with Peter. Don't give me the sack and lecture me. Look here! You take the sack back again, and lecture me till I'm good. It won't take long."

"No, Search, no," returned the unbending sire. "It can't be overlooked. Here's my last word: if you like to come back in a week's time, I'll give you another chance—perhaps." Therewith he turned and left the delinquent.

"That won't do," said Hiram, addressing himself emphatically. "There's a chance a minute opening somewhere. I can't afford to wait a week for one. There's the little gell to be provided for. It's kind of you to offer me a holiday, mister, but I can't stop to take it. Here goes the hull population of this planet hotfoot, full tilt, running fit to split from dawn to sunset every day, after the day's rations, with some exalted parties

looking on serene and smilin' at the racket—dukes, and a prince or tew; but it's no use for me to sit down alongside the superior human article. Perhaps I could smile at the racket as pretty as any of 'em; but that wouldn't find me two days' rations every day; and I must run with the ruck, I reckon, and kick and elber right and left, and run cunning. Very well, then.—Bank, ma'am! Whitechapel, mister! This way to the bank. Reg'lar load o' capitalists to-day. Get along!"

All day, Hiram looked about for chances, and next morning he set out afoot in pursuit of employment. After many intricate wanderings, many inquiries, and as many rebuffs, he came, in a retired tumble-down square, midway between Fleet Street and Holborn, upon an announcement that compositors were wanted. Anything dingier than the dingy placard which bade Hiram inquire within, anything dirtier than the windows, anything filthier and more rackety than the stairs, he had not seen in London. Upon one landing, a barrel of printer's ink had leaked, and

having trodden upon the sticky mass, he ploughed his way upstairs as a fly goes over that humane invention the "catch-'em-alive." An exaggerated smell of damp newspaper—the distinctive odour which attaches to an ill-ventilated printing office—saluted the applicant's nostrils; and a hot blast of air, such as a furnace might be supposed to breathe if its digestive apparatus were thoroughly diseased, swept at him as he opened a swinging door at the head of the stairs. Right and left at double frames, pale men and weedy lads faced each other, picking up types as if for bare life. In the streets, the spring sunshine had been bright; but here, above every double frame hung a cobwebbed gas-bracket, patched with pasted paper here and there, to cure the leakage of gas, which nevertheless smelt horribly; and from each bracket sprang two flaring lights, with flimsy sheets of green paper hung before them on a contrivance of wire, to shelter the worker's eyes from the glare. No man or boy looked up from his work to remark the new-comer; but after an uncertain pause of

perhaps a minute, a sallow, melancholy-looking man, in a ragged frock-coat and a soiled apron, appeared at another door, and approaching Hiram, asked his business.

"You want compositors?" asked Hiram.

"Yes," said the other.

"I want work."

"Very well," said the melancholy-looking man; "you can begin at once, if you like." He led the way to a frame on which reposed a pair of empty cases. "All this matter is for distribution. It's all minion, and all one fount." Saying this, he pointed to a galley-rack on which rested many columns of half-washed type, and betook himself to the other end of the room.

"Say," said Hiram to a pale and long-drawn lad at the next case, "is there a sink here anywhere?"—The lad nodded his head sideways, and went on with his work.—Hiram lifted a galley and carried it to the sink, and having washed the type thoroughly, took up a handful and began to throw it into the case. His fingers had lost the feel of custom, and he was awkward at first; but

he recovered the art by-and-by, and went ahead at a great rate. "Work pretty regular here?" he asked his neighbour.

"Yes," said he, nodding vigorously at the case and working head and shoulders with unnecessary ardour.

"Piece or 'stab?" inquired Hiram laconically. The inquiry being translated meant, "Are we paid by results, or at a settled rate?" 'Stab is composers' English for establishment, and is even, by that system of compression in vogue amongst them, made to signify establishment prices. In their working hours, composers are the most taciturn of all working people.

"Haven't you asked?" inquired the youth, turning his eyes on Hiram for the first time.

"No," said Hiram. The pale lad having once looked at him, seemed determined to see as much of him as he conveniently could at one eyeful. The new-comer had turned back the cuffs of his shirt over coat-sleeves of new black cloth; and the cuffs were white, and were, as their position proved, actually attached to an under garment. Hiram's

collar, presumably belonging to the same garment, was spotless; his boots were well-made and new. His well-brushed glossy stove-pipe hat hung on a peg behind him. The pale lad gaped at this show of respectability.

"I don't fancy you are one of our sort," he said meekly.

"No?" said Hiram, rattling the type into the boxes, growing pretty full by this time. "Why?"

"It's a turn-over house," returned the lad. "We're all improvers here."

"That's a moral blessing in its way," responded Hiram, to whom the lad's phrases bore no meaning. "Ain't it, now?"

The pale youth smiled drearily in answer to Hiram's glance. "We're turn-over apprentices," he explained. "We've never served our time, and we don't belong to the Union; so we only get paid half-rates?"

"What's that?" said Hiram.

"Why," said the lad, "it's sevenpence-halfpenny a thousand for minion. That's the regular pay. They give us threepence three-

farthings here. At the end of the week, you put in a bill at full prices, and they halve it. Suppose you put in a bill for two pounds, you'll get a sovereign."

Hiram gave vent to a long faint whistle, and having at that moment cleared his hand, walked over to the melancholy-looking man in the soiled apron.

"Look here, mister," said he ; and repeated the lad's statement. "Is that so ?"—The melancholy man in the soiled apron said it was.—"So," said Hiram, "you reckon on half-starving this mean crowd, as an indooce-ment to them to cut the throat of the trade they starve by."

The melancholy man said he might put it that way if he liked.

"Well," responded Hiram, "when a man's hard up, he gets into singular company. You don't seem to thrive, and there's a kind of saddened aspect about the hull kyhoot. I don't make one of this ragged regiment, mister. No, sir ; I do not. I am not afraid of work. I could always beard Employment in his den and Labour in his hall ! But my

intellect’,” added Hiram, with a gracious smile, “is not yet sufficiently overcooked to permit me to jine in with this peculiar enterprise.—Good afternoon, sir.”

“I thought it wouldn’t suit you,” said the pale youth who had given Hiram the character of the place. “They ain’t a high-spirited lot as comes here.” He rubbed his nose with the back of his composing-stick as he made this reflection, and cast a longing look at the cases of type which Hiram had left partly filled. His own were almost empty.

“You can take ’em,” said Hiram, adjusting his cuffs and reaching for his hat. The lad thanked him, and changed the position of the cases; and Hiram departed, without being noticed much by anybody. “An hour and a half wasted,” he thought as he went down the littered inky stairs and emerged upon the streets again. “I’m game to run as cunning as I can,” said Hiram, drawing a long breath of purer air; “but I’ll do nothing to be ashamed of. Me and my little gell can starve without cutting other people’s throats to be allowed to do it.”

For the first time since that adventurous summer day on which he had met Gerard Lumby, the sun went down without his having earned a halfpenny. This reflection saddened him, and he went home footsore and weary. Sitting alone, and smoking a pipe over the ashes of the fire which had that morning boiled his tea and cooked his rasher of bacon, he resolved on a house-to-house visitation through the business realms of London, in search of employment. The stupendous nature of that inquisition half frightened him at first; but, on reflection, he adopted the method as being, after all, the only practicable one.

"I can't advertise," he said between the whiffs of his pipe, "because I haven't got the money; and if I had, what could I advertise for? 'TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC.—A YOUNG MAN who knows his way about, and has travelled, is open to employment as Clerk, Scenic Artist, Newspaper Editor, Chairmender, Composer, Architect, or Sandwich-man. Berth in clothes-store good enough to begin with. No reasonable offer refused.

Open to negotiate with Bill-stickers, Railway Companies, Members of Parliament, and the Public generally.'—They'd laff at that," said Hiram with a dreary smile. "In this effete old empire, a man seems to think he's done his duty if he's learned enough of one craft to help him to cheat somebody into believing that he can work at it. They bind him 'prentice to learn bricklayin'; and if he's got a head on him at all, he knows all they can teach him in as many days as they make him spend years. They reckon on taking seven years to teach a man to stick types on end, and they won't let him earn a living at it till that seven years is wasted. I'm a fairish smith, and I'm a decent wheelwright, and there ain't a better cabinet-maker in London; but because I haven't wasted seven years apiece in learning to use hammer, spokeshave, and chisel, I'm a trade pariah. That's what's the matter with me—I'm a trade pariah. And I call it too cruel ridiculous, that because I'm smarter than ten of these fellers put together, I'm offered half wages."

He knocked the ashes from his pipe, and laid it down on the hob tenderly. It was the identical pipe he had vainly striven to light in the lane ten miles from Brierham, and he had an affection for it.

"No," he continued, half aloud; "I can't advertise; and what's the good of answering? I suppose I can't have spent less than two pound at that since I've been in London; and I never had so much as one reply. There was that clerkship I went for personally. Shall I ever forget it? A street-full of respectable applicants, and every man-Jack of 'em with testimonials enough to fill a butcher's basket. I shall get slanged a good deal on this journey; I shall be a decided noosance to a heap of Christian people. But where there's an advertisement, I'm one of five hundred; and here at least I shall have a chance of lighting on somebody who wants me, and hasn't had time to advertise for me, and bring the other four hundred and ninety-nine cavorting around. It's the other four hundred and ninety-nine that spoils things. Five hundred rats, and

only one wanted to take charge of the candle store. Five hundred redskins, and one white scalp. Five hundred frying-pans, and only one fire." A mere moonbeam of a smile illumined his long countenance. "I am becomin' figgerative," he said, "and that says, 'Lively, Hiram.'—You'd like another fill, wouldn't you?" apostrophizing his pipe. "You look hungry. You shall have it."

He filled his pipe again, and, having lit it, began slowly to undress. This was his first night in new lodgings. Mary was disposed of for the time being; and it had been determined between them that she should try on the morrow to recover her old situation. They were going to get married, for pure economy's sake, so soon as that became practicable. The depressing influence which attaches to new places was upon him. He was and had been for years a wanderer, and yet he felt it for once, keenly. There are some who never quite master that depression. The tables are unfriendly; the chairs have a stand-off air; the grave voice

of the clock is the voice of a stranger; and the very fire shows new faces.

It is not necessary that a man should have been bred like Bayard to be as chivalrous as he; and Hiram, sitting in his shirt-sleeves on the bedside, and pulling solemnly and slowly at the well-blackened clay, was as full of manly tenderness and stout resolve as he could hold.

"I remember once," he murmured in his self-communing way, "coming across an unshelled lobster, on the rocks at home, all soft and pulpy-pink; and I thought what an unprotected poor thing the creature was, and felt kind of sorry for it. I never looked to feel like that myself; but I do. It makes a man sort of fearful and thin-skinned to have a gell to look after. Can't help thinking what she'd do if I broke down. This city gets a man under, too.—Hiram! Mister Search! Think of what depends on you, and hold your head up and step out firm. That's better. Now, then; in to bed you go. Pleasant dreams, Hiram.—Good night, darlin'. Sleep, my dear little gell, sleep!

sleep, and forget your troubles. If I was a cherub, you shouldn't hurt for want of watching."

And Hiram, fairly worn, blew out his candle, laid down the well-blackened clay gingerly on the floor, turned over, and in that last act fell asleep.

He was out early in the morning, and began his round. Busy people declined to waste a moment on him. Others with more leisure questioned him, and sent him on again. Some were civil, some were not. It made no difference to him; he went out at one door and in at another, and ran through his formula with unfailing pluck and cheerfulness. That went on all day, from nine in the morning until seven in the evening, and nothing came of it but weariness. He crept home footsore and with a little failing at the heart. If you have "No" thrown at your head three hundred times running in a single day, you are likely to grow disheartened. Next morning he began again, and prosecuted his weary task till noon. That frozen monosyllable barred every door with

a barrier like ice, until at last he came upon a restaurateur in a little street off the Strand, who offered him a berth as a waiter on condition that he made a deposit of two pounds and gave a satisfactory reference. He gave a reference to the official who had dismissed him, went home and pawned everything but one suit of clothes and his linen, raised the money; and on the following day entered on his new business.

He was not in an exalted sphere of life; but it began in a very short time to pay better than omnibus-conducting. The restaurant was not long opened, and was by no means a high-class concern; but it began in its own way to thrive, and Hiram thrived with it. It was in the man's nature to take a pride in whatever he did; and before he had been in the new line a fortnight, he performed conjuring tricks, with knives, forks, and plates, that were wonderful to look at. Like the proverbial good actor, who lives his part, Hiram threw himself head and heels into the character; and as soon as the funds would allow it, he blossomed

forth in an evening suit and a stiff white necktie. The proprietor rallied him a little, and the regular customers chaffed him mildly, on this butterfly leap from the chrysalis garb. He smiled blandly, and the owner of the place began to think he had picked up a jewel. Hiram, as the business of the place improved, received something considerable in the way of tips, and began once more to lay by money. Then out came from his fictionary uncle's care Gerard's half-sovereign, and this, being drilled, was suspended to the watch-chain which once again hung across Hiram's waistcoat.

He had scarce been invested more than a month, when one day a young gentleman entered sadly, and seating himself, called for a chop and pint of bitter beer. From the moment of his entry, Hiram fixed his gaze upon him, and, when he sat down, walked to his side and awaited his order with a countenance expressive of many emotions. When the order, given with bent head, came to Hiram's ear, his face changed ludicrously. He passed on the demand for the chop with

a private signal to the cook to do his best ; and having set the pint measure beside the new-comer, he rattled about with knives and forks and water-bottle, keeping a corner of his eye on the guest meanwhile. If his object was to induce him to raise his head, it failed ; but when he brought the chop, he succeeded in getting a near look at the stranger's face. There was no other customer there at the moment ; and Hiram took a seat in a box opposite, and watched with a look of evident pity and amazement. The stranger ate his simple meal, and paid for it, and went his way without a glance at the waiter who found him so deeply interesting. Being left to his own devices, Hiram took up a copy of the *Times* and turned to the advertising columns.

“ Yes,” he said, under his breath ; “ there's no mistake. Eh, dear, now ! ‘ Lumby Hall,’ ” he read, “ ‘ ten miles from Brierham, four from Colham, five from Dene.’ That's where I saw him first and last. Great smash in the City. Supposed gigantic frauds by Mr. Garling. Lumby and Lumby. Same name.

Comes from same part of the country. Could afford to chuck half-sovereigns about in them days. Come down to taking his meals in a shanty like this. And the man that's ruined him is the father of my little gell. Eh, dear!"

Hiram sighed most piteously, and sat for ten minutes in tragic amaze, until an order for broiled kidneys awoke him from his stupor.

It was indeed Gerard Lumby whom Hiram Search had seen; but Hiram, though he guessed rightly in most respects, had somewhat overleaped the truth in his belief that Gerard was yet so poor that a few pence spent upon luncheon made a difference to him. Amongst his friends—and this episode, since it led to nothing but his meeting with Hiram, may briefly here be mentioned and dismissed—was one who had been a fellow of his college, and now, having married, and thereby resigned his fellowship, had associated himself with a daily journal. There was then, as usual, a disturbance in the East of Europe—the unspeakable Turk and the equally un-

speakable Christian of those parts being occupied in recriminatory raids and murders ; and Gerard's friend sought him out when he heard of the failure of the firm, and offered him employment as a special correspondent. Gerard leaped at this proposal ; and it was to discuss it that he had come into the street in which the new restaurant was situate. The newspaper offices were only half a dozen doors below, on the same side.

The business not having come to a head between the Eastern unspeakables, the journey Gerard meditated was delayed ; but he went to the offices daily, and almost daily lunched at the new restaurant. In the simplicity of his mind, Hiram imagined that this was the principal, perhaps the only, meal of the young man's day. To suit his fallen fortunes, poor Gerard had sold all his jewellery, and he had become neglectful of his dress. He was not slovenly, but the old precision and nicety had vanished. In the old days, he had carried his head a thought too proudly. He hung it now habitually, and his face was pale. It was no wonder, for his heart was alternate

frost and fire ; and what with his father's loss of all manly faculty, and his mother's grief, and his own loss of love and fortune all at one fell swoop, such cankering miseries gnawed the poor fellow's soul as were almost too much for humanity to bear.

Hiram began to see him regularly, with here and there the pause of a day between. To Hiram's imagination, Gerard's occasional absences meant—no dinner. The tough-tender Yankee began to yearn over him and to sorrow for him. He was too delicate—in a word, he was too much a gentleman—to claim acquaintance with his benefactor in these days of fallen fortune ; but one day, when Gerard—after a two days' absence this time—took his usual chop and drank water instead of beer for some no-reason, and neglected to leave behind him the twopence with which he had commonly rewarded the waiter's service, Hiram leaped further along the mistaken road, and jumped to the conclusion that Mr. Gerard Lumby and actual famine were beginning to make acquaintance with each other. So, begging and obtaining

an hour's leave of absence, the mistaken one slipped out after Gerard, and dogged him home to chambers in the Temple, where he was staying with an old college chum now called to the bar. Hiram saw him enter by means of a latch-key, and went back again. But that night he wrote upon a little bit of writing-paper in a clerkly hand these singular words: "From a true and grateful friend, who remembers a kindness." He folded up in the paper a half-crown, and—he dropped it in the letter-box, addressed to Gerard Lumby, Esq.

Gerard dined, or lunched, more plenteously next day, and took cheese. Hiram served him almost with tears in his eyes, and that night dropped another half-crown into the letter-box ticketed: "From the same." To Gerard's sore heart, these well-intentioned but unnecessary gifts were bitter and enraging, and he asked himself again and again who the base enemy could be who chose so cruel a method of humiliating him in his misery. Sitting in his friend's rooms alone that night, with his own aching thoughts for company, he

heard a stealthy footstep ascend the stair. Wrathfully expectant, he arose, drew back the latch of the door, and waited. The third package dropped by the unknown hand fell with a dull clang into the letter-box. Gerard dashed the door open, and seized a dark retreating figure.

"Come in," he said, in low tones that boded no good to the captive. "Let me have a look at you."

The lithe Hiram struggled like an eel; but the vice-like grip only tightened on him; and strong as the Yankee was, the athletic Briton walked him into the room and had him hatless under the gaslight, whilst you could say "Jack Robinson."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON a bright spring evening, Val Strange's yacht dropped anchor in sight of Welbeck Head and Brierham spire; and four stout fellows pulled him ashore, and landed him in a little bay four miles from home. He knew the country; and leaving the waste sea-beach behind him, struck into the fields, and strolled in green meadows and by fast-greening boughs towards Brierham. The very earth was odorous, and the air like balm. Welbeck Head, half a dozen miles to the left, looked in the light of the setting sun as if it were built of burnished bronze; and in its hollows lay shadows so purple and so liquid, that one might well have fancied every cranny of the vast headland filled with wine. The western air was all potable gold; and the eastern air, a pearly rose; and the

zenith, a blue so soft and dreamy, it drew the soul as well as the eye towards it, and led out all the observer's nature in vague sweet hopes and fancies. Val had surrendered himself to Fate, or, in surrendering, had created Fate. But he was not at ease. Regret and dissatisfaction lurked at the bottom of all his thoughts. There are times when all things resemble the little book which the angel gave to John in Patmos, and the utmost sweetness has its bitter undertaste and aftertaste. Eye and ear and nostril drank delight as he walked; but the soul sat tremulous in the midst of joy, and read half-veiled prophecies of sorrow and disaster.

The heart of man is deceitful above all things. Val had contrived to turn himself from false friend and dishonest lover into knight-deliverer. It would be virtue in Constance to break her engagement with Gerard—

“Since therein she would evitate and shun
A thousand irreligious cursed hours
Which forced marriage would have brought upon her.”

Val's acquaintance with Shakespeare could

not let him miss an excuse so forcibly put, and so pat to his own desires. And it was virtue in him also to persuade her to break that bond. He persuaded himself that he had been a coward in running away, and that it was a duty towards all three concerned—towards Constance and Gerard and himself—to hinder a union in which on one side there was no love and no possibility of love. Let a man set himself to the task of self-persuasion—let him gag Conscience, and lend his ear to his own soul's sophistry—and he can credit anything. This is not the only man who has transmuted scoundrelism into heroism, or deified his own desire and set it up as duty.

He was not by any means sure of his plans; but he was resolved on enduring no delay. He would find a means of communicating with Constance, and he would leave no effort unmade to deliver her from the possibility of a loveless marriage. He was willing to face contumely, to endure his friend's hatred and his scorn, to know that hard things would be said of him by men

whose judgment he valued. And since he quailed from these things in his inmost heart, he found it heroism to face them, and was no more a fool or a villain in that self-deceit than ninety-nine out of a hundred might be if they set their minds that way. "So carpe diem, Juan, carpe, carpe." Ah, the note of joy rings false in the voice of the most mournful of all British singers, and on the silence that follows may steal the tones of an older and a wiser poet: "Rejoice, O young man . . . but remember!"

Walking in such mood as I have striven to indicate, Val came in the course of half an hour or thereabouts upon that ugly landscape-spoiling property of his, the paper-mill; and there, in the act of mounting his dogcart, was Henderson the manager. Henderson, catching sight of Val, descended and awaited his coming.

"The sight of you is good for sore eyes, Mr. Strange," said he. "You are looking wonderfully well, sir." And indeed Val was mahogany-coloured with his six weeks of sea-breezes.

"Any news in this dull quarter of the world?" he asked.

The manager quite stared at him. "News, sir? Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"You don't mean to say," said Henderson, "that you know nothing of what has happened to anybody down here?"

"But I do mean to say it," Val returned. "What has happened? Whose cat is dead?" For Mr. Henderson was a marvellous retailer of marvels which had in them very little of the wonderful for other people.

"Lumby Hall and the Park are in the market; to begin with," responded the manager, with something of the air of one who justifies himself.

Val turned pale under his bronze, and repeated the words questioningly. "Lumby Hall and Park are in the market?"

"The house has gone to pieces. The cashier, Snarling—no, Garling; that was his name—bolted with half a million, so it's said, and everything has gone under the hammer."

This news shook the hearer from head to

foot, and he held on by the rail of the dog-cart, and cast so stricken a look on Henderson, that the worthy man was alarmed, and insisted on Val entering the office and sitting down.

"I'd no idea, sir," he said, "that the news would affect you so. Let me offer you a little whisky. It's just a sample that I had sent in yesterday." He opened a cupboard, and produced a black bottle and a wine-glass.

"No!" said Val, waving his hand against it. "It was so horribly sudden, I was shocked. What has become of—of Gerard Lumby? He was going to be married, poor fellow."

"Yes," said Henderson, almost with a relish. "He was going to wed that handsome lass at the Grange, Mr. Jolly's daughter. That's all broken off now, of course. The losses have driven poor Mr. Lumby out of his senses; and they tell me he just sits like a baby and counts his fingers, and they feed him like a child."

"Horrible!" said Val, with a shudder. He felt as if he had planned to break into a house, and heaven's lightning had scattered

it to ruin and ashes at his feet. All this news had been a nine days' wonder to Henderson and his compeers. The interest had faded out, and it was quite a pleasure to renew it by telling the tale to one who was so deeply moved by it. He flowed on, therefore, and told all he knew, and perhaps a trifle more.

"And curiously enough," he added, when his tale was done, "we've got a memento of the great commercial disaster here. It came this very afternoon; and if you'll come this way, I'll show it to you."

Val followed him, incurious. His mind was still deadened by the shock of thoughts which had assailed him at the first. Constance was free, and his guilty plan—for he knew its guilt in the searching light of that moment—was no longer needed. And Gerard, his friend, had not only lost the love Val had meant to steal from him, but had lost all with her—father, fortune, home. Val Strange trembled at that swift and awful blow, and loathed the thought of his own falsity to honour.

The manager led the way from the office to the working chambers of the mill, and halted in a great storehouse with rough-cast walls, where tons of waste-paper lay heaped to the ceiling — vast piles of newspaper returns; whole libraries of worthless books torn from their bindings, and ranged in level rows or thrown in heaps; pyramids of coarse packing-papers, pyramids of lawyers' briefs, parliamentary returns, blue-books, contractors' specifications—a thousand things that had served their turn, or swerved aside from it and fallen useless; and at the edge of the waste, a column of books of unusual size, a yard wide and deep, and six inches in thickness. The binding had been torn from these, and the backs were a tangle of broken string and cracked threads of glue.

"These," said the manager, "are Lumby and Lumby's ledgers. It was just by accident that I turned the pages over. It was the unusual size of them took my notice, I fancy." There was a rough table on strong trestles in the room; and Henderson, lifting one of the great volumes, laid it down and turned over

the leaves. "Splendid stuff," he said, with the paper between his finger and thumb. "They had everything made to last; and you'd just have thought the concern as solid as the hills."

Val absently took a leaf of the great ledger and turned it over, and looked at the methodical neat entries, column after column. The action and the glance were alike automatic. He had no thought of what he saw. Mr. Henderson swelled himself a little with the natural dignity of the showman, and looked on, pleased with his discovery and with its effect upon his employer. A workman in search of somebody in authority looked into the building, and seeing the manager there, told him of some slight matter which had gone wrong. Henderson, with more alacrity than common, departed to set the something right, and Val was left alone. Turning over the great stiff pages absently, he came upon some papers crushed between the leaves, and mechanically smoothing them, uttered a sudden exclamation. Next he snatched up these papers, and read them at a glance, and

laid them down again with his head whirling. A wild surprise and a terrible temptation reached his mind together, for the papers he had discovered were no other than the drafts made out by Garling in surrender of his booty. A blue foolscap document, written in a stiff and legible hand, lay on the page before him, and Val's eyes swept over these words, clear as print :

“In consideration of the receipt of a written promise to refrain from criminal proceedings, this day handed to me by Gerard Horatio Lumby, I, the undersigned, Edward Garling, make confession that I have robbed the firm of Lumby and Lumby, of 107, Gresham Street, of the sum of two hundred and fifty-three thousand two hundred pounds, and do now make full and complete restitution of the same.”

Henderson's voice sounded outside, giving final instructions about that trifling something wrong which had called him away ; and Val, with an impulse for which he did not care to account, swiftly folded the papers and transferred them to his breast-pocket. A

stupider man than Val Strange had ever been would have understood the situation at a glance ; and he grasped it, swift as lightning. He held in his possession recovered fortune for his rival and his friend. Constance was free ; but how long might she remain free if he handed these all-important papers at once to their rightful owners ? The temptation which assailed him in the instant of discovery was—not to destroy the papers, for that would have been too gross a crime for him to contemplate—but to reserve them until he had made good his own ground with Constance. In the mere fraction of a second, his mind seemed to take in every side of the case. Gerard had already lost Constance, and by this time had at least recognized the fact, if he had not yet begun to grow reconciled to it. If he, Valentine Strange, succeeded Gerard Lumby as her affianced husband, Gerard Lumby would be no worse off than now ; and if, thereafter, he handed over the discovered papers, Gerard would have every reason, comparatively, to be happy. If, on the other hand, he did what every honourable

and native instinct prompted him to do, and gave up the papers at once, was there not a chance that Gerard would reassert his claim, and a chance that the claim would be allowed? Whilst all this and more raged through his mind, Henderson returned.

"You're really looking ill, Mr. Strange," he said, surprised at Val's aspect. "You'd better let me drive you home."

No, Val protested; he was well enough—a little startled, that was all. He would walk across the fields. And so, with a brief leave-taking, he was going, when he bethought him of a precautionary measure. "Don't have those ledgers meddled with, Henderson," he said. "I should like to look at them. Leave them as they are." Henderson promised.—Mr. Strange's desire was an understandable whim enough. Val was keen and quick, and had something of that faculty which makes successful scoundrels and great generals: in things that really interested him, he left nothing essential undone. He had not yet decided whether or not to be an utter rascal; and if the papers had to be redis-

covered a month hence, it would be well to have a reasonable place in which to rediscover them. What better place could there be than that in which they had been originally discovered? But he had not gone a hundred yards away from the mill, when he returned. Henderson was again mounting his dogcart, when Val came running back to him.

"On second thoughts, Henderson, don't keep those ledgers. Use them up at once. I can't bear to see them again. Use them up first thing to-morrow."

Again Henderson promised, and again Mr. Strange's desire was an understandable whim enough. How should the manager guess the fight in his employer's soul which resulted in those contradictory orders? Val strode away across the fields rapidly, half fearing lest he should rescind the order. So weak was he to resist the tempest which tossed him, that before he had again reached the place at which he had turned back, he threw himself on chance to know whether he should finally keep or destroy the ledgers. On that point for the moment he contrived to pivot the

greater question—whether he should here and now play the man, or play the knave.

“Head, I keep them—tail, they go.”

He drew a handful of loose coins from his pocket. Heads, every one! Fate seemed to tempt him; but a sudden revulsion at the thought that honour should be at the mercy of so poor a chance, sent him along the road again, and he left the great ledgers doomed behind him.

The domestics of his house were used to his comings and goings, and he found all things in tolerable readiness. An hour or two after his arrival, dinner was served up, and he sat down to it with little appetite, and toyed with the dishes one after another, and sent them away scarcely tasted. He had not yet made up his mind, and could not; but over a bottle of Clos de Vougeot and a cigar in his own especial den, he completed the perusal of Garling’s luminous narrative, and so made himself familiar with the whole circumstances of the case. In that narrative he scarcely knew whether to wonder most at the insolent completeness of

the disclosure, or the amazing patience and cunning of the fraud. "My crime," "my fraud," "my system of embezzlement," and kindred phrases, were used with a scorn for periphrasis, and an absence of any affectation of repentance so complete, that the reader's admiration and detestation of the writer seemed to grow side by side.

"I was first led," wrote Garling, "to the contemplation of my crime by the ridiculous laxity which left all things in my power."

"Ah!" sighed Val, laying down the manuscript after rereading the opening passages, and that amongst them. "How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds, makes ill deeds done!" He filled his glass again, and sat staring at the fire. There was a vinous glow at his heart, a vinous brightness in his brain. "I can't associate myself," said he proudly, "with a villain of that type. If I hold these papers an hour longer than I can help, I shall identify myself with Mr. Garling; an association I have no mind for."

His decision was made at last. Gerard should have his own again, and Val would

rely on the justice of Fortune to repay him for this sacrifice to honour. In the glowing warmth with which the generous vintage filled him, he had an easy presage of victory. Why should he be afraid of Lumby? he asked himself. Constance had never cared for the fellow, but had been persuaded into the match because it was socially a good one. She had cared for him—he knew it, though she had not confessed it, and had indeed in self-defence denied it. Taking it altogether, he, Val Strange, had acted very well, and was still acting very well. Lumby could find no reasonable fault with him now. He was genuinely sorry for Gerard's misfortunes, and in his own sense of security, he began to be genuinely glad that he could put a partial end to them. And indeed a quarter of a million sterling might well console a man for the loss of a prospective wife. Not in his own case, of course. That would have been an absurd suggestion. Val, never having felt the want of money, had a noble scorn for it. He threw it about with a splendid recklessness and royal prodigality,

and never spent a quarter of his income, being innocent of expensive vices, and despising the card-table and the turf. But Gerard was poor, and the return of the money would compensate for much to him. And be that as it might, by all rules of love Val had a perfect right to try his fortune now.

He rang the bell, and the old butler answered the summons.

"The yacht," said Val, "is lying about three miles this side of Daffin Head. Supposing this"—indicating the bottle—"to be the paper-mill, and this"—indicating a cigar-box—"to be our present position, the yacht is here;" and he set down his wine-glass in a straight line beyond the bottle. "As straight beyond the mill as you can go. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the butler. "It'll be in Quadross Bay."

"That's it," said Val. "I had forgotten the name of the place. Send one of the fellows to the yacht in the morning to tell Richards to pack my things and come up at

once. Have him here by half-past nine at latest. I am going up to town in the morning."

"Very good, sir," returned the butler, and retired.

Jim, the groom, being charged with the commission, saw his way to an unauthorized enjoyment; and putting dogcart and horse together at once, drove to a certain hostel within half a mile of the little bay, and there meeting some of the yacht's crew, went aboard with them, and held high revel until one in the morning, by which time his master, with a comfortable sense of benignant virtue on him, had just turned into bed. Jim, the groom, reappeared in due time with Val's body-servant and divers portmanteaus; and away went Val, body-servant, portmanteaus, and all, up to London, by earliest train from Brierham Station. He had learned from the butler that the Grange, like the Hall, was empty. He had no immediate means of learning Constance's whereabouts, but that could not be a difficult matter in London. Her father and her brother were

probably at the Albany as usual, and there was Miss Lucretia to apply to.

But first, with a feeling of magnanimity and honesty in his bosom which was very pleasant after his late self-accusings, he sought his lawyer, and from him obtained the name and address of the legal adviser of the late firm of Lumby and Lumby. The legal adviser was a high-dried little man, extremely old, and so very dry and wrinkled, that at every change of feature, whilst Val told his story, the young gentleman had a notion that he ought to hear him crackle as dry parchment would have done so twisted. The old lawyer was by no means so sanguine of the restoration of the property as Val had been.

“Mr. Garling,” he said, in explanation of his doubts, “has gone to Spain. The police can tell you so much about him. It is very probable that this is so much waste-paper after all, giving us merely the melancholy satisfaction of knowing the truth. The English and continental journals gave news of the failure of the firm and of Garling’s

flight, with some supposed enormous gains ; and it is quite on the cards that he may have renewed his hold upon the money—quite on the cards.”

At this view Val became so evidently depressed, that the lawyer proposed to set an end to doubt at once by a visit to the bank and a telegraphed inquiry to the bankers at Madrid. Val assenting eagerly, the high-dried little man got into a cab with him and drove away without loss of time. Then, for the third time that day, Val produced the wonderful papers and told his tale. The manager having heard it through with great astonishment, wired at once, and promised to despatch a messenger with tidings of the answer.

Val arranged to call upon the lawyer at the hour of six, and went upon his own inquiries. First to the Albany, where he learned nothing. Mr. Jolly and his son were out of town, and since they had left no instructions for the forwarding of letters, were not expected to be long away. Next to Chesterfield Street, Mayfair, where Miss

Lucretia's house was found deserted. Val knocked and rang, refusing to believe that his quest had ended in a no-thoroughfare; and at last, disheartened, got into his cab again, and was driven to his own chambers. Emerging thence, he took another hansom, and drove wildly about town, calling on everybody he knew to whom Reginald was known. He took no more by this move than by the others. Streets were up on all hands, still; the faces of the houses were given up to the painters, and the pavements were planted thickly with scaffoldings and ladders. Nearly everybody was out of town, and Val met nobody who could give him the information he wished for. By the time at which his unavailing search was ended, he was due at the lawyer's, and hastened thither fuming, and blaming his own precipitancy in setting Gerard anew upon the chase before he himself knew in what direction to start.

"No answer has yet arrived," said the lawyer, in response to his inquiries. "I have received a message from the manager, who promises to send me the news when it comes.

It will be forwarded to him at his private residence, and he will wire to me. Will you wait?"

Val answered in the affirmative, and sat down. The minutes glided slowly by, more slowly than he had ever known them glide. Twilight began to fall; and the lamplighter, visible from the window, travelled round the square, leaving the lamps agleam behind him. The clerks had gone already; and the lawyer, having lit the gas and drawn down the blinds, sat with his parchment face bent over a parchment deed, and read and read and read, making pencil-notes on a block book at his side, but never looking at the hand which wrote them. This proceeding getting to have something of an eerie look at last to Val's eyes, and an eerie effect upon his nerves, he begged leave of absence for a quarter of an hour.

"I shall be here for another hour at least, now that I have begun this," said the lawyer. "Go and dine by all means. Take your time."

Val let himself out, and stumbled down

the dusky staircase. He did not care about dining; but paced up and down the flagged border of the square, behind a cigar, keeping watch upon the lawyer's door. After half an hour or so, he grew tired of this, and returned. The man of law admitted him, and set his parchment face above the parchment deed again. The place became so silent, that Val could hear his own watch ticking. An hour went by drearily, and the parchment being done with, was folded, put into a tin case and locked up in a tin box, and the lawyer lowered his lamp. "Something the matter with the wires," he said composedly. "Suppose we give them to half-past nine. What do you say?"

Val said "Yes" to that; and they sat on in silence.

"Do you mind this twilight?" asked the old man, after a great gap of time had been crossed. "It rests my eyes."

"Not at all," Val answered; and again they sat in silence. Rumours of the life of the streets reached them now and then; at times a footstep coming nearer made the watchers

prick their ears and listen ; twice a footstep paused outside and went on again. At last, upon the very limit of the time, and when the lawyer had already reached out his hand for his overcoat, the sound of a hurried footstep and a cheerful whistle coming near arrested it. The outstretched hand changed suddenly from its first intent, and without moving a muscle, enjoined silence. The step paused before the outer door, and the whistle ceased ; and then, as though paid in proportion to the noise he made, and wildly anxious to increase his salary, the owner of the step plunged upstairs and battered at the door. The old man responded, received a telegram, turned up the lamp, opened the envelope, put on his spectacles, all with aggravating slowness, drew forth the enclosure, and read it. Then suddenly flashing from an old man to a young one, he strode across with outstretched hand and slapped Val on the shoulder.

“You have done it, sir ! The money is safe. That scoundrel hasn’t got it, after all.” The parchment face was flushed, and

the old eyes were moistened. "I didn't dare to hope it," said the old fellow. "I declare, sir, I am more rejoiced than if the money were my own!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

GERARD, grasping Hiram tightly by both arms, faced him beneath the gaslight. Hiram, scarcely understanding as yet who had got hold of him, faced Gerard. The two looked at each other curiously.

"I reckon, mister," said Hiram, "that you've made some sort of error."

Gerard seemed to be of that opinion too, if his face were trustworthy. As to who Hiram might be, he had not at that moment the remotest notion.

"Perhaps I have," he answered, with a touch of dubious sarcasm in his tone. "We shall see." He released Hiram, and warned him. "Stand there. If you attempt to make a move, I'll throw you out of the window."

"Then," responded Hiram, "I will not attempt to make a move. Your diggings air

too lofty." He kept his eyes on Gerard, but stooped for his hat, warily, and having secured it, brushed it with his elbow, and set it on, a little on one side. Gerard, regarding him, stepped sideways to the letter-box and took out the packet. He knew by the look and feel of it what it was ; but he was in a mood to do strict justice. He opened the package, therefore, and found the half-crown in it, and the inscription on the paper, as before.

"Now," he asked, tossing the half-crown on the table, and looking dangerously at Hiram, "who set you to do this ? Don't prevaricate with me, or I'll break every bone in your body. Tell me who sent you here with these insolent messages."—Hiram returned no answer, but held him with his glittering eye, watchful of every movement.—"Out with it !" cried Gerard.

"Keep your hair on," returned Hiram, in a tone of soft expostulation. "You're in no hurry to get bald."

Gerard made a swift motion towards him. Hiram made a swifter in retreat. The two being on either side a round table of consider-

able size, it was not easy to get at close quarters, unless both were so minded. Hiram in his flight contrived to possess himself of a poker, and held it in an attitude of defence; improvized and amateurish, but unpleasant for an assailant to look at. Gerard, even in his heat of anger, recognized the loss of dignity inevitably accruing to a chase around the circular table, and stood still, devising means of approach. Hiram took advantage of this pause, and prepared to offer suasive counsel.

"This is not a reception," he began, "calculated to feed the enthosiasm of affection."

At that second, Gerard vaulted the table, closed with him, and wrested the poker from his grasp. Hiram, more fortunate than in their first encounter, eluded his hold, but left a portion of his coat behind.

"Look here!" said Hiram from the other side of the table; "you ridiculous madman. What do you mean by it?"

"Who sent you here?" cried Gerard again.

"Nobody sent me here."

"What do you mean by dropping these confounded things in my letter-box three nights running? Who are you?"

"Now," responded Hiram, in soothing tones, "this is reasonable. If you'll put that poker down and listen to reason, I'll explain. And if you won't, and will insist on strife, I ain't goin' to let you maul me how you like—mind that. I'm loath to hurt you, and bein' a sensible man myself, I am not hungry to be hurt. You don't know me?"

"I don't know you from Adam."

"I am not Adam. I had the pleasure of meeting you, sir, ten miles from Brierham, one hot day last summer, when you paid me this identical half-sovereign for carrying a note to Valentine Strange, Esquire."

"Well?"

"Well. You may remember I told you that you had given me the only streak of luck I had ever had since I landed on these shores. You may recall likewise, that I remarked that if ever you were in a real hole, you might do worse than apply to Hiram Search."

“ Well ? ”

This reiterated inquiry began to assume a dogged and threatening tone.

“ I am beginning to see,” continued Hiram, “ that thistles are my proper diet. I own up, straight, that if anybody had offered me help on the sly like this, I should have rode rusty with him. But if you think that my half-crowns are so plentiful that I can afford to play jokes with ’em, you are prob’ly a greater ass than I am. Mister, let me lay it out straight for you. You helped me, when you were that squeezed in with money you could hardly move. Then I happened to read in the papers about Garling—I won’t distress you if I can help it—then you happened to come and dine at my employer’s restaurant—I was that mudheaded—— Well, now, between man and man, you can’t ask more. I’m sorry I offended. You can call me anything you like, if it relieves you. I deserve to be kicked, though I should not, as a friend, advise any man to kick me. I apologize with all my heart; and if you fancy that I am mean enough to have offended you willingly, you

do me a greater wrong, sir, than I have offered you."

There was positively a real dignity in Hiram's tone as he concluded. His manner was conciliatory, frank, independent, yet submissive, as became his apology.

But Gerard was an Englishman, and was not going to be conciliated all on a sudden by any man alive.

"Couldn't you guess, you blundering idiot," he said roughly, "that you could do nothing more offensive, nothing more insulting?"

He was very favourably impressed with Hiram, or he would not have bestowed a word upon him.

The other felt a sort of amity in the rough words and tones, and half unconsciously advanced to meet it.

"Let me make my excuses as clear as I know how," he said. "It's partly the smallness of the sum that aggravates the natural feelings of the British aristocrat."—Gerard laughed outright, his first laugh for six weeks. — "It is indeed," said Hiram. "Seriously, now, it is. There never was

anything I tried to do with my fingers I couldn't manage, worse or better ; but in respect of feelings, I haven't got a sense of touch at all, and that's a fact. But now, look here ! I am real grieved, but—— Look here ! Don't you mind me because I can't grease it and make it run smooth, and scent it and make it smell nice. You helped me, and you told me a lie when you did it. Yes, sir. Says you, 'I've got no silver, dern it all ;' and I saw the shine of silver in your purse. Then says you again, 'I suppose you don't earn half a sovereign so easy every day ;' and you put that rather harsh, to save my feelings to make me think it wasn't charity. I've thought of that often ; and I've said to myself, 'Send that man round to me if ever he's in trouble, and I am game to my bottom dollar.' I have not your sense of touch, sir, in these matters, but I was deeply grateful, and I've had a liking for you ever since. I took a foolish way of showin' it, and hurt your feelings. But, now, I've apologized, and you have looked over my clumsiness, and now—clean straight—I'm worth five pounds. Is half of that any use to you ?”

"My dear fellow," said Gerard a little haughtily, "you are quite mistaken in supposing that I am in want of money. If I were, I should find other means of getting it, than by taking your earnings from you."

He was somewhat touched, in spite of his hauteur. Perhaps he was a little loftier in manner because he was touched, and did not care to show it. He read incredulity in Hiram's face; and to put an end to his doubts, he sent his hand into his pocket and drew out a mingled handful of gold and silver.

"I am not in immediate danger of starvation," he said lightly and in a kindlier tone.

Hiram felt the friendliness of this revelation instinctively. He did not stop to think it out, but he knew that Gerard would rather have submitted to any misapprehension, than clear it in this way unless at the bidding of an impulse altogether friendly.

"You are a good fellow, Search," said the gentleman, reaching out his right hand. "You misunderstood my position—that was all."

Hiram pushed out his lean claw at arm's length and executed a solemn shake-hands.

"I am glad to see," he answered, "that I am not such an ass as I thought I was. You luffed just now when I called you an aristocrat. But I was not mistaken."

Gerard laughed again. "This open expression of opinion is a little embarrassing, Mr. Search."

"I beg your pardon," said Hiram gravely; "I will not offend again. I have not your sense of touch, sir. I am not an educated man, and I am not acquainted with the ways of society. But I will not offend again."

"What have you been doing since I saw you last?" asked Gerard, anxious to atone for his misunderstanding of Hiram's gratitude. The man's simplicity and truthfulness attracted him. Hiram began to tell his story. Neither of them noticed that the outer door had all this time been left unfastened, until, in the midst of Hiram's narrative, a great hammering began upon it, and Gerard, arising to open it, met Val Strange and the lawyer in the lobby.

"Mr. Lumby," said the old lawyer, directly he set eyes upon him, "let me congratulate you! We have recovered everything that villainous Garling ran away with. You are a wealthy man once more."

This was a burst of singular indiscretion for so discreet a man; but the old boy had had the news pent in him for ten minutes; he had been a dear friend and old school-fellow of Gerard's grandfather; he had been his father's adviser this thirty years past or nearly; and he was more puffed out and explosive with joy and triumph than a legal authority of threescore years and ten can endure to be with safety.

The result of the communication thus made was alarming; and Gerard, beneath the little gaslight in the lobby, turned so pale, and made so blind a clutch at the doorpost, that the lawyer caught him on one side, and Val Strange on the other, and led him back into the room, where he sank into a chair, hid his face in his hands, and sobbed hysterically.

"Really, my dear Gerard," said the little

old lawyer, standing over him, patting his shoulder, and trying to cover his own error by disregarding the effect it had upon the other, "we must have a little jollification on the strength of this discovery. Really we must. Wine must flow for this, sir. Perrier-Jouet?—Pommery-Greno?—the life-blood of the Widow Clicquot?—what shall it be?" All this time he was patting and smoothing away at Gerard's shoulder.—"Mr. Strange," he cried, not ceasing this friendly attention for a minute, "we ought to have supplied ourselves upon the way. It is all due to our friend Mr. Strange, under Providence, that this amazing discovery was made, Gerard. Your friend Mr. Strange is answerable for it. —Come, come, come; you'll get up and say 'Thank you' to Mr. Strange, surely. A quarter of a million is worth saying 'Thank you' for. Come, come, come."

Running on thus, to cover Gerard's confusion and his own, he patted and soothed until Gerard raised a pale face and looked around him.

"What hit me," he said, "was the thought

of the poor old governor. If it all came back, it would be too late for him."

"No, no, no!" cried the little lawyer. "Let us hope not—let us hope not. Let us trust in Providence. He will recover, and spend many happy years, I trust—many, many happy years."

And that ancient lawyer, spite of his face of parchment, and the legal inner dust of fifty years, sat down and wept for joy. In all his threescore years and ten he had known no greater grief than the fall of the great house. A placid equable life of threescore years and ten, with a little love-making in it, so far back that his old sweetheart's children were common councillors, and nothing to mark its even tenor since those far-off days, but two strong friendships. The two dearest friends he had ever had were Gerard's grandfather and father. Why should he not feel a touch of friendly joy again? But the old man's emotion killed Gerard's; so far as show was concerned, at least. The two young men shook hands with each other and with the lawyer; and he, conscious of human

frailty, made great efforts and pulled himself together, and the three sent out for wine, and made bright speeches, and tried to be merry—with the ghosts about'them. Constance for Val's ghost. Gerard's father with wrecked intellect and blighted life for the old lawyer's. Both for Gerard, and his pale mother seated between the two. And so the wine ran dull somehow in spite of its sparkle, and suddenly Gerard, in his attempt to be gay, bethought him of Mr. Search, and made inquiry for him. Hiram had disappeared.

Hiram indeed was by this time in his own lodgings, pulling at the black clay by the side of a guttering tallow-candle.

"I am glad of his luck," he said heartily; "and it's a sort of weight off of me somehow that Mary's father has dropped that ill-got load. I'd have liked to have congratulated him; but I daren't stop for a word. It might pay a waiter too well to look honest, to congratulate a millionaire, when you've just lent him seven-and-sixpence."

When a single bottle had been opened, and one libation poured to Fortune, the lawyer

took his leave, and the two young men remained together. Val was very bitter inwardly, and Gerard's thanks were wormwood to him. Gerard was all gratitude and grief and hope, a very compound of contradictory emotion; Val, all rage, watchfulness, and despair. He was enraged at his own fealty to honour. Why should he have played such a card as he held into Gerard's hands until he was sure of his own end? He was keenly on the watch to draw forth or catch the news of Constance's whereabouts. He half despaired of winning now, for he had cast the winning card away, and so for once he drank deeply, talking the while with a feverish attempt at gaiety, and pushing the conversation, whenever he could, in the direction of Gerard's hopes. For a long time nothing came of this, but at last Gerard said, "I shall cross to Paris to-morrow, after seeing the governor."

"Ah!" responded Val, with well-concealed interest. "What is going on there?"

"Why," said simple Gerard, "you know, of course, that when this smash came, I was

engaged to be married! That went by the board, with everything else. And now it's the only thing I care for, that it sets me right in that respect again. We shall have to divide with my cousins, of course—the poor old governor is out of it for ever, I am afraid—but I shall have enough left. You heard what was said just now. Their share is not more than fifty thousand apiece. That leaves a hundred and thirty-three thousand to the governor, and the old house and my mother's property, besides what is saved from the smash. We are as well off as ever, thanks to you, old fellow. We haven't as much money, of course, but we have more than we shall ever want to spend."

"And so you're going to Paris to-morrow?" said Val, bringing the conversation round again. It was horrible to listen to Gerard's talk of certainty, but he must listen, to learn what he wanted to know.

"Yes," said Gerard. "I shall see my mother in the morning, and break the news to her, and see the governor, and then cross over."

"Are they all staying there?" asked Val, pouring out a glass of wine, and pressing the neck of the bottle tightly against the glass, to prevent them from clanking in his agitated hands.

"Yes," responded Gerard. "Constance has not been well lately, and Miss Jolly—that's her aunt, you know—insisted on going to Paris for a change."

"Where are they?" asked Val. His voice veiled his own tremor and despair so ill, that he was almost amazed to see it go unnoticed.

"At the Grand Hotel," Gerard answered; and, being no further questioned, slipped into silence.

Val sat on thorns a while, and then took leave. Once in the street, he ran until he found a hansom, and was driven to his chambers at full speed. His luggage was undisturbed. He bade his man carry it out to the hansom, and, side by side with his valet, rode to St. Katherine's Docks. The boat for Boulogne started that night at eleven-thirty, and was caught at the moment of departure. An eighteen hours' passage

would land him at Boulogne at half-past five, in time for the six o'clock slow train for Paris. Even that gave him some faint hope of seeing Constance before she retired for the night. Gerard, starting on the morrow, would leave Charing Cross at half-past seven in the evening, would reach Paris at six in the morning, and would possibly go to bed to snatch a few hours' sleep. There loomed another chance.

Half the gloomy night, Val paced the deck; and at last, with a greatcoat and a rug, lay down upon it, beneath the clouds and the solemn rifts between them sown with earnest stars. There was but half an hour to win by, and the thought kept him awake, in a panic of hope and fear. Slowly the stars faded; the intense depths of sky grew gray; the clouds, which had been gray, grew black; the bleak sunlight touched the sulky Channel billows. He rose again and paced the deck, and looked at the Kentish coast, still in sight, and sickened for the journey's end. All day long time crawled, and his veins fevered, and his watch seemed to stand

still. But five o'clock saw Boulogne harbour ; and then, whilst the hands of the watch suddenly ran with great rapidity, the boat seemed to crawl on the water. Half-past five, and the harbour scarcely seemed nearer. At six minutes to six they moored beside the Port, but on the wrong side for the railway station. Seven minutes later, Val stood upon the platform, and looked after the last carriage of the retreating train.

He waited with racked patience for the next train. Perhaps after all Gerard might miss it—might somehow be delayed. The slow, deliberate seconds, the leaden-footed minutes, the dreary, dreary hours, went by. The mail-train drew up at the platform, and he took his seat. Everything was silent, and the place seemed asleep, until the sudden flare of gas and the sudden rush of storming feet told the arrival of the mail passengers. He would not look to see if Gerard were there or not. Fortune had been against him all along, and would be against him still. He set up the big collar of his travelling-coat, and pulled his cap down upon his eyes,

to escape a possible recognition. The clamour and bustle died away on the platform. The signal sounded. The carriage answered with a jerk to the first motion of the engine, and at that instant a passenger opened the door of the compartment in which Val sat, and leaped in lightly. It was Gerard Lumby.

END OF VOL. II.





